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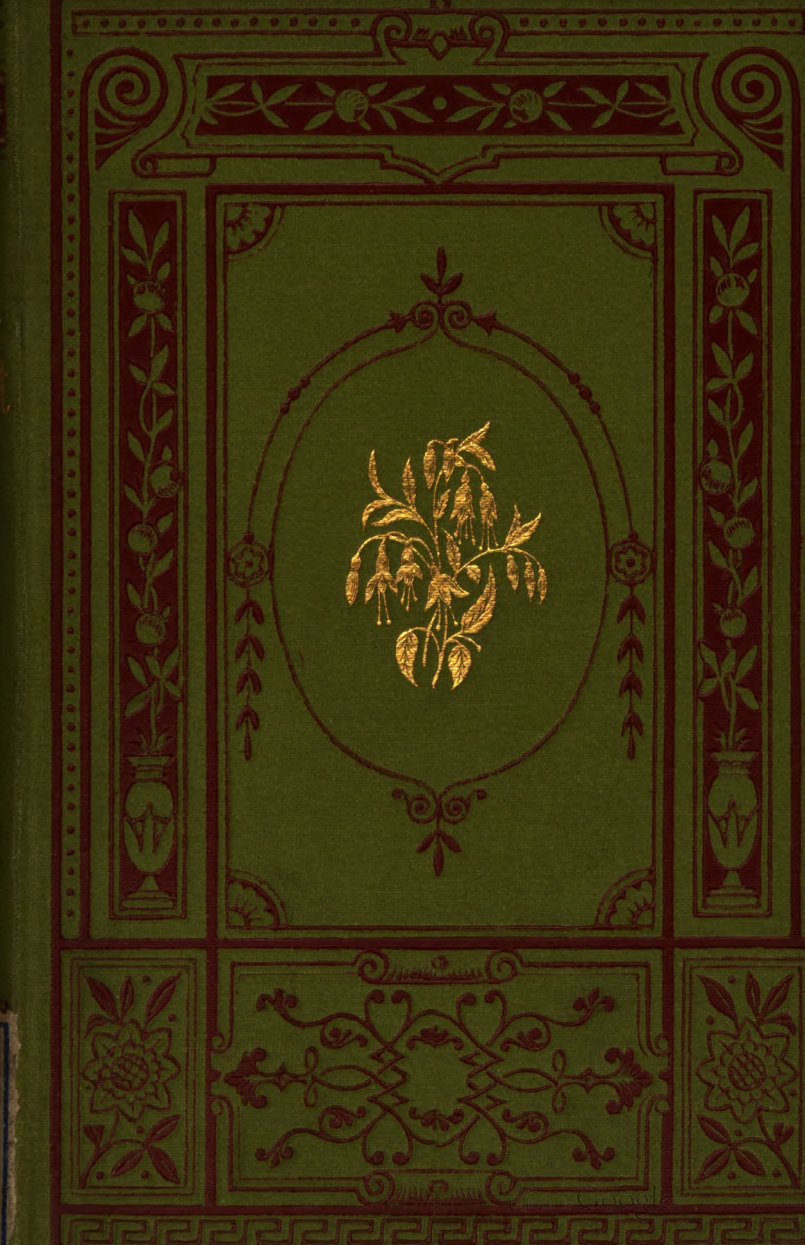

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MARK WESTCROFT

CORDWAINER

A VILLAGE STORY

BY

F. SCARLETT POTTER

AUTHOR OF 'HEROES OF THE NORTH,' 'AMBROSE ORAN,' ETC.

W. & R. CHAMBERS
LONDON AND EDINBURGH
1885

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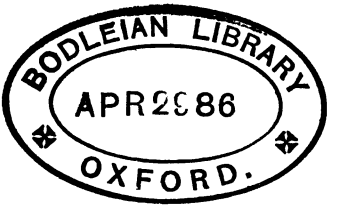

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MARK WESTCROFT.

CHAPTER I.

AN ADVENTURE ON THE RAIL.

IT was one of the great London railway stations, and a train was about to start. All was bustle and confusion on the crowded platform. The porters were too busy to attend to passengers who looked unlikely to pay them for their trouble, and among these latter was a poor woman, who, with a child on one arm, a load of packages on the other, and a second child clinging to her skirts, was trying to make her way to a third-class carriage. Encumbered as she was, it was no easy matter for her to push her way through the crowd, nor was she very successful.

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She was still some little distance from the door of the carriage, when the string which held her parcels together gave way, and they were scattered around her. She stood in hopeless bewilderment, and began to cry.

In a third-class compartment, opposite to the spot where this little accident took place, the nearest corner seats were occupied by two men. One of these was smartly dressed, and wore a heavy gold albert chain and a big ring. His features were somewhat red and coarse; he was evidently what in plain English would be termed a "betting-man," but who would probably have styled himself a "sporting gentleman." To him the woman's misfortune seemed to afford considerable amusement, for he laughed heartily.

The passenger opposite to him, though not in his working-dress, was plainly a young mechanic. He was a pleasant, intelligent-looking young man, whose age might perhaps be slightly under twenty. It might have been observed that he did not join in his neighbour's laugh. He did not even smile. Instead of amusement, he felt only sympathy for the poor woman under her trouble. Had he possessed the same familiarity with the world and ready assurance as his fellow-passenger, he would on the instant

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have jumped out and helped her. But his habits had not given him this readiness of mind. Whilst he was resolving to do it, the occasion went by. A gentleman, who was passing up the platform, came to the woman's aid. With an alacrity which made Mark Westcroft—for that was the young mechanic's name—ashamed of his own slowness, this person stepped up, spoke a cheery word or two, which made the woman dry her tears, collected her packages, and lifted them and her children into an empty compartment. Then with a smile and a nod, and saying, "Now we shall be all right!" he ran off towards his own seat, the train being now fully due to start. He had several books and magazines under his arm. In his hurry he dropped one of the former, but he was in too much haste to notice its fall. His loss was, however, observed by Mark Westcroft.

Now, that young man had been almost as much disgusted at his own want of readiness as he had at the rude mirth of his fellow traveller. Why, he asked himself, could not he have been prepared to do the right thing at the right moment, like the gentleman? He had no intention of failing in the same way a second time. He was on the alert now. He sprang out and picked

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up the volume, that he might restore it to its owner. But he was too late to carry out the whole of his intentions. He secured the book, but as he did so the gentleman disappeared in a first-class carriage at the farther end of the train. He would have hurried after him, but for this there was no time. He was barely able to regain his seat, when the door was slammed by the guard, and the train was in motion.

"You had better mind what you are about, my young friend," said his fellow traveller, "or you'll find yourself on the treadmill. I shouldn't like to stand in *your* shoes," and he glanced at the book.

"I only got it to give it back to the owner when the train stops," answered Mark, reddening slightly.

The betting-man was one of those pleasant persons who think that to cause a little alarm to a modest young fellow shows their own superiority, and is, moreover, an excellent joke. Mark's rising colour led him to believe that he had a greenhorn to deal with.

"So you say," he went on, "and so you may say; but that won't save you. I saw you collar the book; other people saw you collar it. Depend upon it, the guard did; and there will be

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a policeman waiting for you when we pull up at Oxbridge station. Take my word for that!"

But Mark was not so green as to be ignorant of the amiable feelings which prompted his companion's speeches. He knew pretty well what they were worth. I do not say that they did not, in passing, cause him a slight sensation of uneasiness, for he knew that injustice is sometimes done in the world. But, on the whole, he had far too much confidence in the honesty of his own intentions, and of his power to show that they were such, to allow himself to be seriously alarmed. But he did not care to talk to such a companion. He sat back in his corner, and began to turn over the leaves of that volume which, according to his fellow passenger, was to cost him so dear.

If it had been in the nature of Mark Westcroft to become a thief, that book was assuredly one which he would have liked to keep as his own. It was the "Life of a Scotch Naturalist," by Dr. Smiles. It was a work calculated to have more than common attractions for our young friend.

Mark was in a general way fond of reading, but books which treated of natural history he read with particular pleasure. In those rare country rambles which had fallen to his share as

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a London apprentice, he had found his chief enjoyment in observing such plants and animals as came in his way. Now, Edwards, the hero of this book, was a shoemaker, like himself, and Mark could thoroughly enter into the humble craftsman's struggles, amidst poverty and evil fortune, in pursuit of that delightful branch of knowledge which he loved, and which he was eventually to extend.

He was presently so much absorbed in the discoveries of Edwards, and in the wild adventures and dangers which he encountered in the pursuit of them, that he forgot all about his disagreeable companion, and his threats of the treadmill. Hs felt sorry when he was obliged to close the book as the train drew up at Oxbridge, where he knew there would be a stoppage for a few minutes only. There was, of course, no policeman in waiting for him. No sooner had the train stopped than he got out, and went towards that part of the train which he had seen the gentleman enter.

He found the carriage and the person he was seeking with little difficulty. At the latter he had looked so closely, that he was sure he should know him again. Though still a young man, the gentleman was some years older than

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Mark. He was rather tall than otherwise, wore a light brown beard, and had a pair of remarkably keen brown eyes. His features bespoke a cultivated mind and refined tastes, and had withal a pleasant and kindly expression. His dress was not nearly so smart as that of Mark's fellow passenger; yet his appearance as plainly showed "the gentleman" as that of the other did the reverse.

"I think, sir, that this is your book?" said Mark, handing him the volume.

"Why, yes; I believe that it is. But how could I have lost it? I have not left the carriage."

"You dropped it on the platform in London."

"Humph!" growled an elderly traveller, who, muffled in a rug, and with a travelling-cap drawn down almost over his eyes, sat in one of the further corners of the compartment. "They are all the same! This young fellow picks up your property and takes possession of it. When he has kept it for two hours, and finds that the book is not one of the raw-head-and-bloody-bones stories which his class care to read, he brings it back to the owner, that he may get a shilling for his honesty. That's the way with them!"

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As the elder gentleman said this, an expression as of pain passed over the features of the younger one. But this was not observed by Mark. He was too much occupied by his own feelings of injured pride, and by his sense of injustice to do so. He again coloured, but he was not now silent, as he had suffered himself to be under the coarse jesting of the betting-man. He was anything but a coward at heart, and when really put on his mettle, a quiet man generally comes out better than a noisy one.

"I did not return the book," he said, "when I found it, because I could not—the train was starting; but I neither picked it up, nor kept it, with any other thought than that of giving it to the person it belonged to. It was not that I did not like the book that I did not want to steal it, for it looks almost as interesting as Waterton's Essays, or White's "Selborne," or Hugh Miller's "Schools and Schoolmasters," which I had rather read than any story-book that I ever met with. As to expecting money, I am sure I never thought of being paid for just giving a thing back to its owner, which any one would do."

The elder gentleman gave another "humph!" but said nothing more.

Whilst Mark had been speaking, the younger

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one might have been seen to raise his eyebrows slightly; but when our young friend had finished, he simply stretched out his arm and shook hands with him, saying as he did so, and whilst a peculiarly winning smile played over his face, "Nor should I think of insulting you by offering you money. Thank you very much for the trouble you have taken. I hope we may meet again."

The train was again about to move onwards, and Mark had to hasten back to his seat. When he had resumed it, and was once more being whirled along the line, he had abundant matter for agreeable reflection. He had met with something of an adventure. The mere thanks, and the shake of the hand from one who evidently could understand and respect honest pride, had been worth more than a gift of money to him. Mark had too much sense to hold the insane belief that all men are equal. He knew that it was not so. And in this young gentleman he was sure that he had come in contact with some one very much higher and wiser than himself. The stranger's pleasant smile, too, had quite won his heart. He felt that to know that gentleman and win his good opinion, would be things worth doing.

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The stranger had said that he hoped that they might meet again. Mark wished that they might; but that seemed to him to be scarcely probable. For Mark was young, and the world seemed to him a vast place. He had yet to learn that though to appearance so large, it is to all intents and purposes a very small place, in which we are constantly coming in contact with those whom we wish, and still more frequently with those whom we do not wish to see.

Whilst, with his mind occupied with these thoughts, Mark Westcroft was borne onwards to his destination, it may be well for us to learn a few more particulars with regard to him.

Mark came of a family of village shoemakers who had, for three or four generations, followed their craft at a place named Blendon. His father had, some sixteen years before, moved to London, in the hope of bettering his circumstances. But he had not thriven, though a sober man and a good workman; luck had been against him. His health had been bad, and he had now been dead for nearly a year. He had been able to make no provision for his family, and his widow, a native of Blendon, had returned to her native village, where a bachelor brother had offered her a home.

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Mark, who was the only child, had been brought up to the family trade, and he had continued to work in the shop of his late father's employer; but the separation thus caused was bitter alike to mother and son, and a few days before the above incidents took place Mark had received a letter from her, telling him that if he would come down to Blendon he would find both work and a home there. He had accepted the offer, and was now on his way to the home of his fathers, and that earlier by a day or two than he had led his mother to expect his arrival.

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CHAPTER II.

A MATTER OF MYSTERY.

IT was growing dusk when the train stopped at Gorsham Road Station, which was the place to which Mark Westcroft had taken his ticket. The village of Blendon was still some three miles distant. Among other vehicles, a smart dog-cart, with a livery servant, was waiting outside the station. From a hasty glance which he caught of him, Mark had a vague idea that the person who drove away in it was the same gentleman that had shaken hands with him; but this might only have been his fancy. It was scarcely likely that his hero would, like himself, have got out at this particular station rather than at any other.

As for Mark, he was not of that class of passengers for whom smart carriages and livery

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servants wait. Indeed, as he had been able to leave London earlier than he had hoped, it was most unlikely that any one from Blendon would be at the station to meet him. He had no one but himself to care for him and his luggage. He saw his box safely housed, to await the Blendon carrier on his return from Gorsham market on the following day; and then, shouldering a little bundle, he set off to walk.

Though Mark had been little more than an infant at the time of the removal of his parents to London, he had, some eight years earlier, paid a visit to his Blendon relatives, so that he felt few doubts about the road. It was not, however, a very direct one, for only the first mile of it lay along a great highway, the remainder being through a succession of country lanes, and these, except upon Gorsham market-days, were generally sufficiently lonely. This latter was, however, a circumstance which a young fellow like Mark was not likely to regard with any feeling of uneasiness.

Whilst he followed what had formerly been the coach road, our young traveller found that he had still a sufficient amount of daylight, and there were enough both of vehicles and foot

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passengers to make the way cheerful. But no sooner did he turn into the first lane than all this was changed. No one appeared to be coming his way, and in a few minutes his road led him under the shadow of an extensive wood, where everything was dim and indistinct.

Mark remembered these coverts quite well. A part of them extended almost to the village for which he was bound, and they belonged to Squire Darrell of Oakenshaw Court, a gentleman who owned the whole parish of Blendon.

As there was still light sufficient to show the road, Mark found the solemn gloom of the wood rather grateful than otherwise, after the glare and bustle of the London streets. All was silence, except for the occasional hum of a beetle or the hooting of an owl. He had walked on for perhaps a quarter of an hour, enjoying—for he was of a somewhat imaginative turn of mind—the silence and his own thoughts, when he became aware of the sound of footsteps behind him.

A man with so light a pocket as Mark had no reason to fear thieves; but still, in a lonely place, every one is inclined to feel a natural distrust of a stranger, and the young shoemaker was not free from this feeling. Besides, in such

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a road, he preferred his own reflections to a companion of whom he knew nothing. Without looking back he quickened his pace and walked on.

As he did so, the person behind gave a low and peculiar whistle. It sounded so much like a signal that, for the first time, Mark felt a slight sensation of alarm, and this was increased when he heard the stranger begin to run, evidently with an intention of overtaking him. Mark felt very much inclined to run also, but was ashamed to show such a sign of fear.

He was glad that he had not done so when a moment later he heard a call of, "Hi, Cobbler, hi!" pronounced in an undertone. This naming of his craft seemed to show that the person behind knew him. He turned his head slightly, to look back, and could distinguish the figure of a man within fifteen yards of him.

"Westcroft, I say, Westcroft!" cried the stranger, in the same subdued voice as before.

Mark smiled now at his own apprehensions. Surely this must be some one from Blendon, who had been told by his relatives that he might possibly come by that evening's train, and had been directed to look out for him. He stood still and waited for this unknown friend to come

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up. There was just enough light to show him that the person was a great broad-shouldered fellow, the lower part of whose face seemed to be muffled up in a comforter, in a manner that the season of the year by no means demanded. As he came nearer, Mark had an idea that, however friendly the intentions of the fellow might be, he was not exactly the man that one would choose to meet in a lonely lane on a dark night.

"Why couldn't you stop sooner?" were his first words when he came up. "I've a'most blowed myself running after you. Look here, Westcroft; you're going to Blendon. Now, I tell you to keep clean away from it. You won't be safe there for a day. Now, don't say that I haven't warned you. So look out for yourself, for I must be off."

And without another word, and before Mark could recover from his astonishment or make any answer, the fellow disappeared in the wood.

Mark Westcroft walked on in a state of very considerable bewilderment. What could be the meaning of all this? Who could this strange man be, and to what could his warning refer? What possible danger could an inoffensive handicraftsman like himself incur by simply

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going to his native village to follow his trade? Look at it from which side he would, Mark could see nothing that seemed in any way to explain the puzzle. As he went on his way and thought upon it, his adventure appeared more like a dream than a thing which had really happened.

But he had no further adventure that night. The rapid pace at which he walked presently brought him from under the dark shadow of the wood, and out into the open starlight. His road lay plain before him; and in less than half an hour he was safely at his uncle's door in Blendon.

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CHAPTER III.

THE VILLAGE HOME.

AFTER a separation of so many months, we may be sure that the meeting between Mark and his mother was a joyful one.

It was in the house of her brother, Michael Barnet, that Mrs. Westcroft was now living. Michael was a hedge-carpenter. He was younger than his sister, and had never married; and as his cottage was a much larger one than ordinary, he had proposed that Mark should lodge and board in it, and that mother and son should thus live together, as was natural and right. Mark was to have employment with another uncle, a brother of his father, George Westcroft by name. This uncle still carried on the old family business of the Westcrofts, and the place in his shop, which had till of late been occupied

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by his own son, was to be taken by Mark. Arthur Westcroft, George Westcroft's son, had recently left Blendon; but the circumstances under which he had done so Mark had as yet to learn.

Uncle Barnet and Mrs. Westcroft were at supper when our young friend arrived, and he sat down with them. Of this uncle he had seen but little. Though still scarcely to be called a middle-aged man, Michael Barnet was unusually grave and silent. He seemed never to speak unless speech were absolutely necessary, and then to use only as few words as possible. This scarcely tended to make him an agreeable companion; yet Michael was a man of worth and good sense, and, in his silent way, of much kindly feeling. If he did not give his nephew a warm welcome, he gave him at least a sincere one.

Mark's recent adventure was naturally among the things uppermost in his mind, and he was not long before he spoke of it. Mrs. Westcroft held up her hands, and was loud in her expressions of astonishment. She was as little able to account for it as her son.

Michael Barnet listened to them both in silence, and then asked for a particular descrip-

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tion of the man by whom Mark had been accosted. When it had been given to him, he replied only by a solemn motion of his head, something between a shake and a nod.

"Can you guess who it was, brother?" asked Mrs. Westcroft eagerly.

"Maybe I can; maybe not," returned Michael slowly.

"And whoever do you think it could have been that would have talked in that way to my boy?"

"It's no use, sister, to talk about what we think, if we don't know. Least said, soonest mended."

Mrs. Westcroft pursued the subject no further. She knew her brother's habits. But Mark could not free himself from the idea that his silent uncle was not without some shrewd suspicions, both as to the meaning of the warning, and as to the person who uttered it.

It was to a bedroom which differed widely from any that he had before called his own that Mark went that night. On two of its sides the rafters, with their covering of thatch, sloped nearly to the floor; but it was airy, for it was open to the ridge-piece, and tolerably large. As Mark looked round it, he noticed a piece of

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wall at one end where he could fix a shelf nicely for his few books; and there was a window through the thatch, with a small table near it, at which he thought he could sit and read on wet evenings, or when he wished to be alone. Different as it was from London, Mark did not dislike the appearance of his new home.

When he looked out next morning, he found that he had still greater reason to be pleased. His window in the thatch opened, through woodbines and climbing roses, on a flourishing garden, which was, for a cottage garden, of considerable size; and everything there looked green, and bright, and beautiful, under the early morning sun. Uncle Barnet was a great gardener, and the garden had in truth been the chief reason which had induced him to take this cottage, so much larger than he required for his own wants. When not working at his trade, Michael Barnet spent most of his time in gardening. It was an employment that suited him. With his spade in his hands he could be silent. He was not obliged to talk to his potatoes or roses.

One of Mark's first proceedings that morning was to pay a visit to his uncle and future master, George Westcroft; and on his way he made some further acquaintance with the village

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of Blendon, of which as yet he knew little beyond the recollections of his boyhood.

Blendon might, as compared with most other English villages, be called large; but its population was almost wholly an agricultural one. Its inhabitants were farmers and their labourers, and such tradesmen as depend for their support upon the tillers of the soil. Among the last-named was George Westcroft.

With this uncle Mark had been better acquainted than with Michael Barnet, but he found him much changed since he had last seen him. He was, it is true, an elder brother of the father of our young friend, and an elderly man, but he now looked far older than his actual age. His expression and manner were those of one weighed down by some great trouble. Mark knew of no reason for his being thus depressed, for there had been no recent death in the family, and his business was considered a flourishing one.

As they talked together, however, the young man observed that his relative scarcely mentioned the name of his son Arthur, although it was the absence of that son, whose place in the workshop he was to fill, which had been the cause of Mark coming to Blendon; and also that whenever he was obliged to speak of him,

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he did so in a manner which showed that it caused him pain, and that he turned to another subject as quickly as possible. Mark had sufficient delicacy, when he noticed this, to avoid asking any direct questions about his cousin.

Old George Westcroft had several married daughters, but this was his only living son. Mark had known Arthur well when, as a boy, he had visited at Blendon, though his country-cousin was some two or three years older than himself.

He naturally felt curious to know something more with regard to him and his doings, and mentioned the subject in the evening to uncle Barnet and his mother.

Perhaps the last kind of topic on which Michael would have cared to be talkative was the business of his neighbours. When Mark inquired as to what sort of person his cousin had grown with manhood, he was told that "most people had their faults, and that by all accounts Arthur had his." And when, speaking of his uncle's offer of constant employment, and using a common form of expression, he asked "whether Arthur had gone away from Blendon for good?" he was answered shortly and dryly by Michael, "that the only good he knew of

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in his going away was, that it was for the good of Blendon."

From which replies, Mark gathered that Arthur could not have been altogether a credit to his family, and that he had probably left the village under discreditable circumstances.

Our young Londoner soon settled down into his new mode of life. From the first it was plain that Uncle George was inclined to take kindly to his nephew; and no sooner did he find that Mark was a really expert workman, and anxious to make himself as useful as possible, than his nephew rose to a very high point in his good graces.

The home life of our young friend with his mother and uncle went on very smoothly and not unpleasantly. It is true that, with the latter, he was not able to hold any great amount of conversation; nor was he allowed to help him in his garden, for Michael Barnet had a maxim to the effect that if two men worked in one garden, one would be sure to do as much harm as the other did good. But these things mattered little. Mark had pursuits of his own with which to occupy his leisure time agreeably.

Something has already been hinted with regard to these pursuits. We have already seen

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that Mark had interests of a higher order than those which belonged to his daily toil. As a boy he had received, perhaps, a larger share of school teaching than commonly falls to lads in his walk of life, or, in any case, he had turned that which he did receive to better account than most. Afterwards, whilst his days were spent in mastering his trade, he had in the evenings availed himself of those means of instruction and mental improvement, which, in our great towns, are open to the young mechanic of studious tastes. The free libraries of the metropolis had enabled him to indulge his taste for reading, and to make the acquaintance of the best books. And the result had been, that among those who pass as the "educated classes," not a few might have been found far inferior to this young artisan in mental culture and breadth of information.

His own books were necessarily few; but these Mark had unpacked and ranged on his shelf, and he now enjoyed reading them in the quiet of the country. But though a good book will bear reading many times, one cannot always read the same over and over again; and once or twice Mark asked himself how it would be possible for him, when winter came and evenings

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grew long, to find enough to satisfy his appetite for books in Blendon.

But that time was far distant, and at present, when the evenings were fine, he had abundance of delightful occupation. He was, as we know, fond of natural history and of nature. Though he had read something, he had as yet seen comparatively little. To be able to explore and investigate the wonders of nature for himself was to him a privilege to an extent which a country lad could scarcely understand. To those bred among these things they are too apt to become mere matters of course. Mark's London life had taught him properly to value them.

The Blendon neighbourhood was not unfavourable for his researches. The district was hilly, and abounded in woods, and was therefore one in which a wide variety of birds and animals —including those of the less common kinds— would be sure to exist. It had also that diversity of heath and cultivated field, waterside meadow and shady lane, which produces a rich and varied catalogue of wild plants. In whatever direction Mark might take his evening strolls he would be sure, at almost every step, to find matter for delight and wonder. He had con-

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stantly to pause to observe the form or habits of some living creature with which he was as yet unfamiliar, or to gather some flower whose name and appearance were unknown to him. Each evening he would have some treasure—some plant or insect habitation—to carry home to his room under the thatch, whilst his curiosity was excited to observe and collect still more.

Thus, though Mark had at present made no acquaintances of his own age in Blendon, he found time pass pleasantly in his village home.

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CHAPTER IV.

GETTING INTO TROUBLE.

THERE were large woods near to Blendon—that fact we have already had occasion to notice—and of these the most considerable was Oakenshaw Wood, the same covert under one side of which Mark had passed on his way from the station. This wood was irregular in its shape, but in one direction a person might have walked across it in a straight line for more than a mile without passing its boundaries. In some parts it consisted of comparatively new plantations of larch, or fir, or ash; but in others you would find an ancient growth of forest trees of large size, and sometimes so gnarled and hollow as to show that they had been standing for centuries.

Across this wood, at intervals, ran broad green

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paths, partly formed for the purpose of carting timber or brushwood, but still more for the use of sportsmen—for Oakenshaw Wood had long been a game preserve, and was noted as a fine covert for pheasants.

Now, to a youth like Mark Westcroft few places could be more attractive than a wood. The quiet beauty of woodland scenery has always special charms for a person of thoughtful habits; but beyond this, a wood is the spot above all others in which any one who is bent upon making himself practically acquainted with natural history will find most to interest him. Here is the haunt of strange birds, with shy and mysterious habits. Here live curious beasts, which, if not unknown in the open country, are at least so shy as to show themselves but little there. These are at home in the woods, and unaccustomed to the presence of man, do not fear to let themselves be seen. Here it is that the shrew, and the dormouse, and the mole venture from their underground retreats by day, and will play about the feet of any one who cares to watch them in silence.

Mark had been some two or three weeks at Blendon when his stroll one evening led him to the confines of Oakenshaw Wood. Hitherto no

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one had interfered with his rambles. He was not learned in the law of trespass; and without thinking harm, he climbed the fence and entered upon one of the greensward drives, which have been mentioned above. It happened to be one which led him towards the centre of the wood.

As he walked slowly along it he found much to observe. Among the thickets which bordered it were many striking plants which were new to him. There grew the herb Paris, now ripening its solitary purple berry; there was the quaint tway-blade—that curious orchis—with its single pair of large rounded leaves; and there was the woodspurge, crowned with faint green blossoms, "three cups in one." There, too, for the first time, did Mark meet, in its native habitat, with the most curious and graceful of our few wild English evergreen shrubs, the wood or spurge laurel.

That he might examine these more closely, and search for others, Mark presently quitted the path and wandered off into the thickets. Soon, also, his attention was diverted from plants to things still more interesting, and these were the living inhabitants of the place. The harsh, angry-sounding cry of a nuthatch caught his ear, and looking in the direction from whence

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it came, Mark saw to his great delight the bird which uttered it. It was running, head downwards, down the trunk of a large tree—an attitude in which no other English bird is to be seen—and Mark had ample time to note its beautiful blue-green back and cinnamon breast.

He had never seen a nuthatch before, but he recognized it at once from descriptions which he had read. He remembered that his favourite author, White of Selborne, had many and interesting things to say about this bird; how he spoke of its feeding on hazel-nuts, and how he was accustomed to place such nuts for it in the chink of a gate-post, that he might have the pleasure of seeing the bird open them. Mark would have liked to see his bird take out the kernel of a nut; but he remembered that hazel-nuts were not to be met with in the woods in summer-time. Then the question occurred to him, if the nuthatch lived on nuts, what could be its food at those seasons when no nuts were to be found?

This was an interesting query, and it caused Mark to watch the bird carefully, and to follow it from tree to tree. He noticed that it often stopped to peck something from the crannies of the bark; and he concluded that, like its relatives,

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the woodpeckers, it ate insects. In this he was right. Through much of the year insects form a great part of the food of the nuthatch, though, perhaps, to a less extent than many naturalists have supposed. It is rarely quite without food of the nut kind. At all seasons it hunts diligently for the stones of berries, and for seeds of various kinds; and that it may more conveniently open these and obtain their kernels, it fixes them in crannies in the bark of trees. A careless observer might think that it was picking insects from these crannies, when it is really only cracking nuts on a small scale.

Just as Mark had finally lost sight of the nuthatch, a new attraction appeared in the shape of a squirrel. It was, when he first saw it, skipping about on the ground round the tree trunks, and seemed to be hunting for something among the last year's leaves and scanty vegetation which covered the soil. There was the same mystery in the case of this active little creature as there had been in that of the nuthatch, namely, as to how it could live when nuts and beechmast were not to be had.

Our friend soon saw something which partially solved this question. It was for some kind of woodland fungus that the squirrel was searching,

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and at this, when found, the little animal nibbled eagerly.

Time slipped by whilst Mark was busy with his observations. Beneath the shadow of the woodland trees it was already beginning to grow dusk. Presently some motion on his part made the squirrel aware of the presence of a human being, and it took refuge in a tree. When it was gone our young naturalist began to think that it was time for him to return towards Blendon.

But as he prepared to do so there came a new motive for remaining. Some dusky animal, apparently not smaller than a rabbit, was trotting busily about, as if intent on some active search, at the distance of only a few yards from him. That it was not a rabbit or hare Mark was sure. Although he could not make out its form, its motions were quite unlike the motions of those animals. It kept its head down, and seemed to move close to the ground, as though it had very short legs.

It came nearer, almost close to him, and then, to his delight, he found it to be one of the most curious of our English quadrupeds, but one which he had never before met with in a wild state. It was a hedgehog. After the manner of its kind, it had come out in the twilight to hunt for

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beetles, its favourite food. As Mark remained perfectly still, the creature hunted round him till it almost touched his feet, and when he stooped towards it, instead of making a hasty retreat, like the squirrel, it simply rolled itself into a ball and lay perfectly still.

Mark attempted to pick it up, but the sharp prickles which covered his prize made him drop it hastily. He felt half inclined to roll it upon his handkerchief, and so to carry it home. But a little reflection convinced him that this would be to inflict useless cruelty upon the harmless creature. So, taking a somewhat reluctant farewell of it, he turned with the intention of regaining the path by which he had come.

But this was a less simple matter than he had supposed. In the dark wood the twilight was now thickening rapidly. He could no longer see how to thread his way among the bushes as he had done when coming towards this spot, and had to force a passage through them as best he might.

This was not done silently, and the snapping of twigs which accompanied it was quite loud enough to catch the ear of any person accustomed to listen for such signs of the presence of a trespasser.

And such a person was, as it happened, within

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earshot. Mark was still far from the broad green drive which he was attempting to regain, and was just stepping out of some bushes into a narrow and indistinct track through the thicket, when he suddenly found himself confronted by a man. The stranger was a big burly fellow, dressed in a brown velveteen shooting-jacket and leather leggings; beyond all doubt a game-keeper.

Before Mark could recover from his surprise, he found himself roughly seized by the collar, whilst his captor exclaimed—

"So it's you, is it, Westcroft, my lad? You're just the man I wanted. You'll find before we've done with you that you'd better have stuck to your last. So come along with me!"

All this had happened so suddenly, and so completely had Mark been taken unawares, that it did not occur to him either to attempt to run away, or to defend himself. He did, indeed, make an effort to shake himself free, but the keeper held him like a vice. It was well that he did not attempt to show fight, for though he was neither wanting in strength nor courage, he would have been no match for the powerful man before him, who was, moreover, well used to deal with the roughest of men. And when our young

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friend had found time for a moment's reflection he thought of this and remained passive; asserting, however, at the same time, that he had done no harm, and demanding the reason for his being treated so rudely.

To this the keeper gave a gruff chuckle. "It's no use trying to blarney me, Master Westcroft," he said. "I know well enough what you're after here, and I'd rather have found you than a five-pound note. So come along quietly, or I shall make it worse for you." And he slightly raised the stout ash plant which he carried in his disengaged hand.

Mark was aware that he knew little of country customs, yet he could not understand in what manner he could have offended this official so greatly. But it seemed useless to plead his innocence, and he went quietly with his captor.

His feelings were not pleasant ones. However innocently he might have got into trouble, he could by no means see how he was going to get out of it.

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CHAPTER V.

A FORMER ACQUAINTANCE.

IN a few minutes the blind track along which the keeper was dragging Mark opened into one of the broad green drives; not indeed that which Mark had been trying to find, but one of much the same character. Here, seated upon the trunk of a felled tree, was a second person; not, however, as the prisoner was able to see in the hurried look which he cast in his direction, a second keeper, but apparently a gentleman, dressed in a light shooting-suit, and having a gun in his hand.

"I'm in luck this time, Mr. Horace," cried the keeper in a triumphant tone. "I've got the very fellow we were talking about, sir; I've got Westcroft!"

In this comparatively open spot, though the

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evening was now really fast closing in, there was far more light than there had been among the thick trees, and the gentleman was able to see Mark pretty distinctly.

"This Westcroft?" he said. "You must have made some mistake. He is not our man, though he is very much like him. This fellow is younger and better-looking than Westcroft. For once in your life you are wrong, Harry!"

The keeper now took a more careful survey of his prisoner, and as he did so the tightness of his grasp on Mark's collar sensibly relaxed.

"Why, bless me, Mr. Horace!" he exclaimed; "and so I am. In among the trees, there, I made cock-sure it was Westcroft. I never saw two men more alike. Anybody might have made the mistake. And when I called him Westcroft, he didn't deny the name."

Now, at last, Mark felt that he had a chance of being heard. "I do not know," he said, "for whom you may have taken me, but my name is Westcroft—Mark Westcroft. I meant to do no harm by coming here."

"Then why did you tresspass in the wood?" asked the keeper.

"I was looking for curious plants, and had only been watching the hedgehogs and squirrels

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when you laid hold of me. I did not know that I was doing wrong. If I was, I am sorry for it."

"Mark Westcroft you called yourself?"

"That is my name."

"Then," said the gamekeeper, "you'll be George Westcroft's nephew—his new journeyman. I took you for an old acquaintance, but it seems you're a new one."

"But no new acquaintance of mine," said the gentleman, who, during this conversation, had found time to examine Mark's features more attentively. "We have met before, and I told you I hoped that we might meet again. If I am not mistaken, you are the young man who handed me a book which I had lost, in Oxbridge Station, not many days since."

Between the uncertain light and the confusion of his own feelings, Mark had hitherto seen the speaker very imperfectly. Now he looked at him carefully; and although his dress differed from that which he had worn at their previous meeting, he had no difficulty in recognizing the owner of the "Life of a Scotch Naturalist."

There could be no question as to his identity when that pleasant smile, which had before won Mark's heart, came over the gentleman's face,

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as he proceeded: "You see that my good friend, Harry Gale, took you for another person, to whom you certainly bear a very strong general resemblance, and that person has a habit of watching other animals than hedgehogs and squirrels. I am afraid that Harry handled you more roughly than he would have done had he not mistaken you for an old offender; though, of course, in catching a trespasser he was only doing his duty."

"I did not know that I was doing wrong, sir. I hope you will not be severe with me."

"Why, as you are a friend of mine," returned the gentleman, smiling again, "I expect that Harry will let you off this time."

"Thank you, sir."

"And now, as it will be too dark for you to find out more of the secrets of nature to-night, I suppose you are going home to Blendon?"

"I was about to return when this person laid hold of me."

"Just so. You have never been in this wood before?"

"No, sir."

"Can you find your way out?"

Mark was obliged to confess that he might find some difficulty in doing so.

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"Then," said the gentleman, "Harry shall go with you as guide. Or no; I should like to have more talk with you. I will go myself. Harry, you can go on—and take my gun up to the Court. This way, Westcroft."

The young gentleman knew every path of the wood quite as well as the gamekeeper. He led Mark, not to the distant gate by which he had entered, but to a much nearer exit, opening upon the public road for Blendon. But during the short walk he used his time so well as to draw from our young friend well-nigh all that was of importance connected with his past history, his present life, occupation, and prospects. Had any ordinary stranger taken the liberty to question him about his private affairs, Mark would probably have resented the act as an impertinence. But he felt no inclination to do so in the present case. The manners of his companion were so easy, and his conversation was managed with so much tact, that Mark forgot he was talking to a stranger. And the gentleman's queries were so framed that they seemed to proceed from no vulgar curiosity, but solely from a kindly interest in the person questioned.

When at the boundary of the wood Mr. Horace Darrell, for that was his name, wished

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Mark good-night, it was with an assurance that he would see or hear from him again before many days had passed.

The young shoemaker walked on towards Blendon with a light step. His adventure, which had threatened such disagreeable consequences, had ended, as it appeared to him, most delightfully. The attraction which he had felt towards Mr. Darrell had been by no means lessened by their second meeting. This evening would, he felt sure, be a marked one in his life. Perhaps he had no very distinct idea as to the way in which he hoped that Mr. Darrell's acquaintance would prove of value to him; yet it seemed that, in some way or other, that acquaintance would make his coming life brighter and happier.

Mr. Horace Darrell had also reasons, and more tangible ones, for being pleased with the events of the evening. To one in his position, the mere meeting with so lowly a person as a journeyman shoemaker could not in itself be regarded as a very important event. But Mr. Darrell was an example of the best type of his class, and Mark was not, he saw, an ordinary mechanic. The satisfaction which Mr. Darrell felt was not of a selfish kind.

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Besides being a highly cultivated gentleman, Mr. Horace Darrell was a most conscientious one. Like many other persons of his order at the present day, he was most earnest in his desire to do good to his fellow men, and especially to those who were in any way his dependants. He had already done much, and spent much, for the benefit of the inhabitants of Blendon, and was anxious to do still more.

The object of a scheme, which he was now considering, was to add to the limited means of enjoyment within the reach of working-men, by developing in them a taste for intellectual pursuits. He desired to interest them in books, and those pleasures of the mind which a knowledge of books can confer.

That the older labourers and village mechanics would be brought to seek pleasure and improvement in paths to which they were so little accustomed, was more than he could expect. Whatever success he had to hope for must be among the young men and youths. But he had already found out, as all do find out who attempt such work, how hard it is for a gentleman to obtain any influence, or even freedom of intercourse, with young farm-labourers or rural handicraftsmen. The older men of this

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class can at least be brought to talk freely with their betters on matters which concern their own welfare, if they cannot be convinced by what they hear. The young town operatives are less reserved, and more open to be influenced for their own good. But the young country worker has, unfortunately for himself, a shy, sulky manner, which repels the advances of those who wish to be his friends. His behaviour seems to imply that he regards every one who comes near him, wearing a better coat than his own, as an enemy. It is next to impossible for his superior in life to gain his ear, much less his confidence.

All this Mr. Darrell knew from his own past experience; and whilst such was the state of things, he could not hope to exert any useful personal influence over the young men of the village. But here, in Mark Westcroft, was a young fellow with intelligence and refined tastes, who was on the same social level as themselves. He could mix among them without being distrusted and shunned as a gentleman would be. If Mark could be brought to see the importance of this work, and to share something of Mr. Darrell's zeal for it, the latter saw how he might become a valuable ally.

Though comparatively young, Mr. Horace

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Darrell was no bad judge of character; and from the little he had seen of Mark he was inclined to form a high opinion of him. If, on inquiry, he should find the young man's character to be satisfactory, he was, on his part, ready to be his friend and patron.

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CHAPTER VI.

THE BLACK SHEEP.

THE shoemaker's bench has always been looked upon as a place for thought. Many wise and useful, and many foolish and mischievous speculations have proceeded from it, for the good of the world, or otherwise. Mark, like others of his craft, had plenty of time for thinking whilst at his work; and he thought much over his new adventure.

Apart from what he regarded as its most important result, namely, the bringing of himself again into contact with Mr. Horace Darrell, it seemed, on reflection, to have furnished him with a key by means of which it was possible to explain certain matters which had before been puzzles to him.

It was evident that he had been mistaken by

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the gamekeeper for his cousin, Arthur Westcroft; and the person for whom he had been mistaken had been spoken of by the young squire and his servant as an old offender, and one whom they especially wished to take into custody. His cousin Arthur was, then, a known poacher.

More than this, he must, from what had been said, have recently committed some act which brought him in peril of the law. Arthur Westcroft was reported to have left Blendon, and Mark had reason to believe that he was now living in a great manufacturing town; yet it seemed that the keeper suspected that he was still lurking in the neighbourhood, and indulging in his former practices.

If the keeper thought this, why might not others have the same idea? and if so, might not this account for that mysterious warning which had so much startled and puzzled Mark on his way from the station? That such a warning could have been intended for an utter stranger like himself was most improbable. But he might have been as easily mistaken for his cousin in the dark lane as in the wood; and what could be more likely than that one of that youth's associates, seeing, as he supposed, Arthur

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Westcroft going in the direction of Blendon, and knowing that the keepers were watching for him, should take the trouble to warn him of his danger? Mark's perplexity had been increased on that occasion by his being called by his own surname, and addressed as "cobbler"; but these terms could, of course, have been applied to his cousin Arthur quite as correctly as to himself.

Such were Mark's conjectures; and, as he afterwards found, they were not very far from the truth. Indeed, between the black sheep, Arthur, and himself there was a strong family resemblance; not, indeed, in expression—in that they differed widely—but in figure and height, in the colour of their hair, and in the general cast of their features. A stranger, or, in an uncertain light, any person, might easily have taken one for the other. That it should have been so is not to be wondered at, as the brothers, their fathers, had been much alike. Mark little knew as yet into how much greater troubles and perplexities this unlucky resemblance was likely to bring him!

As Mark, also, was now beginning to make some acquaintances among the Blendon people, he speedily began to hear such rumours as were

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afloat with regard to his cousin. They were by no means creditable ones.

Arthur Westcroft had, it would seem, allowed himself to become connected with a set of wild fellows, known to be poachers, and not free from a suspicion of graver offences. One of their recent exploits had been netting rabbits upon a large scale, on the Oakenshaw estate. Some violence had been used, and one of Mr. Darrell's people had been beaten. As a result of this, more than one of those supposed to have been concerned in the outrage had thought it prudent to quit the neighbourhood, and among these was Arthur Westcroft.

This much Mark was able to gather from the common talk of the village; nor was it long before he heard more about Arthur from the young man's own parents. As he grew more used to Mark's presence, the old shoemaker showed less repugnance to mention his son's name than he had done at first; and after a while he seemed even to find relief in speaking of his trouble to his nephew. His aunt Westcroft, however, was always ready to lament to him the absence of her son, whose faults she seemed to regard as matters of less moment than his misfortunes.

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Arthur Westcroft had been the youngest of a large family, of which all the other members had been daughters, excepting two boys who had died in childhood. He had, therefore, been regarded as an especial treasure by both father and mother. Of the latter, in particular, he had been the pet and darling; and, possibly, her unwise fondness, which led her to indulge his every wish, and rather to conceal his faults than to expose him to punishment, was among the causes of his going astray.

If George Westcroft had been equally fond of his son, he had not been equally indulgent. There was in his character and manners a certain sternness which had inspired the boy with an amount of fear. The shoemaker was in his way a very proud man. He was proud of belonging to a family which had always held itself respectable, and proud of his own upright life and unblemished reputation. Perhaps it might have been better had George Westcroft attempted to instil his own high principles into his son a little less severely than he did; yet, according to his lights, he certainly did his best to make an honest man of him. The shame and grief of such a father as George Westcroft may readily be imagined, when the only and

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much-thought-of son became the associate of law-breakers, and was in danger of imprisonment as a malefactor.

No wonder that such a trouble should have caused that sad change in the old man which Mark had noticed at his first coming. For a time, his anger against his erring son had overpowered his paternal affection, and he had sent Arthur from Blendon with a charge never to darken his doorway again.

Yet Mark found that his uncle was now inclined to relent. Now that Arthur was gone, the father had begun to ask himself whether less severity might not have been better. In the great town, among the bad associates with whom he would doubtless meet, was there not danger that he would become worse than he could possibly have become at Blendon, and perhaps grow utterly depraved? Now that his former companions were no longer in the village, there was hope that Arthur, if at home, might have reformed and grown steady. In short, it was plain that the old shoemaker had become desirous of recalling his black sheep to his fold.

Mark felt deeply for his uncle, whose character he already regarded with the highest respect. He felt for his aunt, also, who was always

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motherly and kind to him, and it distressed him to hear her daily regretting the absence of her boy. Could he have done so, their nephew would gladly have helped these worthy people to gain what they longed for. Sometimes he speculated as to what would follow in case his cousin returned. Mark doubted whether he should greatly care for him as a companion; yet if his own society would serve to keep Arthur from vicious associates, and help him in his endeavours to become a respectable man, Mark told himself that to do so he would gladly give up some portion of his own pursuits for the sake of his uncle and aunt, if not for Arthur's own sake.

Yet these were mere speculations. As things were at present, it was scarcely likely that Arthur would be able to come back to Blendon. Least of all did Mark suppose that it would be in his own power to bring about his return.

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CHAPTER VII.

A WALK AND A TALK.

SOME days had passed since Mark's adventure in the wood. Work was over for the day. He had returned home, and after his usual wash and brush was about to sally forth on one of his rambles. He had a stick in his hand, and a satchel, to hold any treasures he might find, slung across his shoulder, when Mr. Horace Darrell was seen opening the garden gate.

Mark, as he met him on the path, touched his cap respectfully; but Mr. Darrell held out his hand to him with the same smile which had accompanied that action in the railway carriage.

"Let me tell you frankly, Westcroft," he said, "that since our last meeting I have been making inquiries about you—not only here, in Blendon, but of your old employer, and some others in

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London who have known you all your life. It is right that I should tell you what I have done."

"I do not know, sir," replied Mark, "that I have any reason to fear your doing so."

"No sufficient reason, certainly. I have heard nothing but what is creditable; and you may be sure that I should not have taken this trouble if I had not felt an interest in you. I wish to know more of you, and that is why I have come to-night; but I see by your bag and stick that you are going out."

"I was going nowhere in particular. Only for a ramble."

"Which way?—to the wood again?"

"No, sir; but in that direction."

"Then we can walk together, and talk as we go, for I have less time to spare than I could wish. And, besides, there is a person living by the wood with whom I wish to make you better friends."

"Who is that, sir?"

"It is Harry Gale."

"The keeper?"

"Yes, our head-keeper. I am afraid that the little you saw of him the other night was scarcely likely to make you fond of him."

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"Why, no," said Mark, laughing; "he showed about as much civility to me as a terrier does to a rat."

"He handled you roughly, no doubt. But then he took you for a poacher, and he has learned, from experience, that poachers are not animals to be handled very tenderly. Yet you will find that Harry can be quite a different person to the one whom you then saw."

"I hope, sir, that I shall not offend him again by trespassing. I will promise not to do so wilfully."

"You will be in no danger of doing so, for trespassing is entering upon another's property without permission. Do you remember the certificate which our friend Edwards, 'The Scotch Naturalist,' carried, and which gave all gamekeepers and others to understand the real nature of the man's pursuits, and that he carried his gun for no unlawful purposes?"

Mark remembered to have read about this in Mr. Darrell's own copy of the book, and he said so.

"Well, we will not furnish you with such a certificate at present. We must wait till you are a little more famous in the world of science. But, meanwhile, you will not need it in our

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woods, nor anywhere where Harry Gale and myself have authority. So long as you do nothing more unlawful than pry into the secrets of nature, you can wander over the Oakenshaw property at your will."

"Thank you, sir," rejoined Mark, to whom this permission really meant a great privilege. "I shall take care not to abuse your kindness."

"And I am inclined to think, Westcroft," Mr. Darrell went on, "that you may find plenty to occupy you for some time to come within our own bounds. Nature is so full of wonders, that a close observer can always find something new and worth noting, even within the most limited area; and, in fact, in our day, it is admitted that it is the close observer, who contents himself within a narrow range, who does best service to science."

"Being of service to science," said Mark, "is a thing which I could scarcely hope ever to do. I am too ignorant to think of teaching others. I am only trying to learn a little for myself."

"All must learn before they can teach—that scarcely needs saying—and the learning is the real work. But your position need be no bar to your becoming an authority in science, if you care to devote yourself to the necessary labour.

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Such instances as Hugh Miller, the stonemason, and Dick, the baker, of Thurso, and Edwards, the shoemaker, prove that the daily work of a mechanic and the study of nature may well be carried on together."

"And yet our work, sir, seems to cut up our time, so as to leave us but little for any branch of study."

"True, Westcroft; and yet that may not be a real disadvantage. Say, that you were able to give your whole time to your favourite pursuit. In a little while you would grow more or less weary of it, and would no longer engage in it with anything like that zeal which you now do after a day's work."

"Perhaps it may be so, sir; but I am not likely to prove it. There is little chance of my being able to give up shoemaking."

"Do you wish to do so?"

"I have scarcely considered whether I do. I was brought up to the trade, and have never thought of getting my living in any other way."

"Then I may conclude that you have no very earnest desire to leave the bench?"

"No, sir; I suppose not."

"I am glad to hear you say so. It is wiser to be happy in your own place in life, than to

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seek for happiness by getting into a different one."

"And yet," said Mark, "it is generally looked upon as a fine thing to rise in the world."

"And so it is. Nor am I for throwing cold water on the honourable ambition of any young man of great parts who is determined to push his way to the front. But those who have the strength to do this are very few. I was not thinking of these exceptional cases. I was rather speaking of the many young men in your rank in life, who, having got some little education, think their trades beneath them, and try to struggle into what is called a higher position. These it is who, in my opinion, make a mistake."

"Why, sir?"

"Because they gain little by the change. Among brain-workers the competition is far more keen than among hand-workers. The majority of brain-workers have less independence, and are worse paid in proportion to their necessary expenditure. The handicraftsman, who has a trade in his hands, is independent, wherever he may be; and if, like you, he has intellectual pleasures at his command, his position is one to be envied. As I take it, the

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misfortune of the hand-worker generally is, that his mind is so narrowed down to his daily work, that he has no interest beyond it. I want to see more working men made happy by having such recreations as yours."

"There are masters," observed Mark, "who do not like their apprentices or men to care about such matters."

"That must be because the fellows make such matters a cause for neglecting their work, which is their first duty, and ought to be their first object of pride. The dislike you speak of can only spring from the abuse of a good thing. But I shall tire you with so much preaching."

"Oh no, sir; I like to hear you talk. You were regretting just now that we working men had our interests, as a rule, limited to the dull round of our daily labour. It is only too true. Since I have been here, I have often tried to get the common names of the wild plants from the farm-labourers, who, being always in the fields, ought, one would think, to know them well. But I find that they are less familiar with them than a townsman, like myself. It is only for a few of the very commonest that they have names. Everything else is 'some sort of a weed.' This seems strange."

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"It does, and I have noticed it myself. Here and there, indeed, you may meet with an old labourer who is familiar with the more curious wild plants, on account of the healing qualities for which they were formerly valued. But with all the younger men it is as you say. And this is not as it should be. We may be sure that a close acquaintance with these things, on the part of those who have to spend their time among them—an appreciation of their beauty and wonderful structure, and a knowledge of the associations connected with them—would give interest and pleasure to much of life which is now little better than a blank."

"But how will you induce them to do so?"

"How, indeed? That is part of a question to which I should much like to find a satisfactory answer. How to make our Blendon people add to the happiness of their lives, by digging and planting their brains as well as their fields, is a problem which I specially want solved. I should like to see you interested in it also. But that is a matter about which we must talk some other evening, when you can come up and see me at the Court. And now about Harry Gale, of whom we were talking."

"Yes, sir; you said you wished us to be friends."

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"Because I think that you will suit each other. Harry is not one of those of whom we have been speaking, who go about out of doors with their eyes shut."

"Is he a naturalist?"

"He is in his way. He is not a reading man, like you. Of books he knows nothing; and I do not suppose that he has any knowledge of plants. His business has been among living creatures. Throughout his life he has been abroad at all hours in the places which wild creatures most frequent; and as he is a shrewd observer, and has a powerful memory, he can tell a great deal about their habits and peculiarities, with which the writers of books are unacquainted."

"He must be worth talking with."

"Decidedly. He is full of anecdotes of beasts and birds; and, besides, he is a clever practical naturalist. He stuffs animals very well."

"That will be interesting."

"Yes, his lodge is quite a museum. When he traps or shoots anything that is curious he preserves it. We shall be at his house directly."

During the latter part of this conversation they had been walking through one of those green drives in the wood of which mention has

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previously been made. They were now getting near its end. Before them the path sloped steeply down to a little hollow which marked the farther boundary of the wood. Here stood the keeper's lodge, and before it stretched a piece of greensward which it overlooked. It was a sheltered and beautiful spot, overhung as it was on three sides by the wood.

Harry was not in his house. But scattered over the small paddock in front of it were a number of hen-coops, the temporary homes of the hens which served as nurses for his young pheasants; and busied among these the keeper was seen.

They walked towards him; but no sooner did Harry become aware of the presence of his young master, than he came to meet him and his companion. Mark found him by no means so formidable as he had appeared at their first interview, and it was plain from the kindly manner which he assumed towards our young shoemaker that he had already received a hint to regard him as a friend.

They all moved towards the cottage, but at the gate of its little garden Mr. Darrell stopped.

"For the present, Westcroft," he said, "I leave you where I found you—in Harry Gale's

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custody. You are in safe hands. I have an engagement which I must now keep; but we must have more talk as soon as we can find leisure for it. Can you come to see me at the Court? I can show you some things there which will interest you. Shall we say Friday evening, when your work is over? Good. Let it be so."

And Mr. Horace Darrell walked briskly off.

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CHAPTER VIII.

AT THE GAMEKEEPER'S LODGE.

THE gamekeeper and Mark being thus left together, the former opened the garden gate, and led his new acquaintance to his house. The lodge was quite pretty enough to be worthy of its situation. Before it was a gay little flower-garden, the pride and delight of Mrs. Gale, and the cottage, which was itself thatched, had, stretching along its front, a kind of thatched verandah, supported on the rough trunks of fir trees. These pillars were wreathed with clematis, morning-glory, and other climbing plants.

The door was opened for them by Mrs. Gale. Harry was himself a man of nearly forty, but his wife was some years younger. They had no children ; otherwise, perhaps, neither Mrs. Gale's

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flowers without, nor what Mr. Darrell called Harry's "museum" within, would have been in their present excellent order.

To the museum Mark was speedily introduced. Round the walls of the living-room, as well as those of the little parlour, from the joists almost down to the floor, were the objects which the keeper had collected. These were either the stuffed forms, or, in some instances, merely the skins of such creatures as he had considered rare or interesting. Many of these were merely varieties of common birds or animals which chanced to be white, pied, or otherwise unusually coloured; but others were to Mark of far greater importance and value. They included many of those rare quadrupeds and birds which we find mentioned in the works of naturalists, but of which even an observant man may often pass through life without meeting with an example. Gamekeepers have far greater chances of seeing such things than other people.

Mark was really much interested and delighted with what he saw and with what he heard, for Harry had much to tell about every one of the specimens—how, when, and where it was captured, and what he had observed of its habits, or those of its fellows, whilst alive. And he was

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well pleased to find so willing and intelligent a listener as Mark.

His young companion was, moreover, able to give something in return. His reading enabled him to tell the keeper about foreign animals, of kinds nearly the same as those before them; and in, at least, one instance, to furnish the correct name and family of a bird by which Harry had been fairly puzzled. In short, notwithstanding their difference in age, the two were soon on the best of terms.

A fine fellow was Harry Gale, and quite deserving of the praises with which his young master had spoken of him. In one of his delightful books, the Rev. Charles Kingsley tells us that a gamekeeper is "merely a poacher turned inside out." This, though a neat remark, leads one to conclude that Mr. Kingsley could only have met with very inferior examples of the gamekeeper order. Granting that at the outset the stuff from which both are made—young peasants, that is, who happen to be fond of sport, daring, and adventure—is much the same; yet the training of the poacher and that of the gamekeeper will tend to develop widely different characters.

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The lawless pursuits of the poacher, and the lawless associates with whom they are followed, will be almost sure to make him sly, unscrupulous, and brutal—fit for anything that is bad, and for very little that is good.

But there is much in the keeper's calling calculated to bring out the better points of character. His daring is exercised in the way of duty, and develops honest, manly courage; his frequent intercourse with his superiors has the effect of softening and improving his manners; whilst, as in the case of Harry Gale, the keeper living much with nature, often becomes observant of it, and grows learned in the habits of wild creatures.

With a better specimen of his class than Harry it would be hard to meet. With his young master he was a great favourite. He had been in the service of the Darrells all his life. He had known Mr. Horace from childhood, and had been the trusted companion and guardian of his holiday rambles when a boy. Mark found that in admiration for the young squire they had a second taste in common; and when our friend left the keeper's cottage that evening, it was with the understanding that

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he would be welcome there as often as he chose to come to it. More than this, Harry offered to take him with him on his rounds, when Mark could find time for that purpose, and promised to show him many things that would interest him on the walk.

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CHAPTER IX.

A VISIT TO THE COURT.

TO his coming visit to Mr. Horace Darrell, at Oakenshaw Court, Mark naturally looked forward, as to something of an event. That he should have been invited to go there was, moreover, we may be sure, a matter of much pride and glorification to his mother; and even uncle Barnet expressed his satisfaction in more words than he usually uttered.

On the appointed evening, Mark walked to the Court, where Mr. Darrell received him with his accustomed frankness and kindness; and whatever there was worth seeing about the house and gardens, that gentleman showed to him himself.

Though not actually in name, Mr. Horace

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Darrell was, to all intents and purposes, owner and master of Oakenshaw Court, and of the large estate attached to it. His father, a man far advanced in life, had for some time past been rendered helpless, both in body and mind, by paralysis. Thus the duties and responsibilities of property had fallen on Mr. Horace, the only son, before he had actually inherited it.

The mansion was large and handsome, and contained many fine pictures and other objects of curiosity. Whilst Mr. Darrell pointed out these things to his visitor, he was keenly observant of all that the latter had to say regarding them; but young Westcroft's remarks showed so much intelligence and information as by no means to lessen his patron's good opinion of him. On the contrary, they tended greatly to increase it.

When all the sights of the Court had been seen, Mr. Horace led Mark to the study, which formed his own private sitting-room. A great part of its walls was lined with book-cases. The works which filled them were well chosen; and as Mark ran his eye along the shelves, he read the titles of many volumes which he longed to read. "I think, Mr. Darrell," he said, "that I feel inclined to envy you your books more

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than anything else of all the interesting things that you have shown me."

"Undoubtedly," replied the host, "there is no other article of luxury—if we must call it such—from which a thoughtful man can derive so great an amount of pleasure, apart from any higher gain, as from a good book. Besides, the satisfaction one has in owning books need not be a selfish one. We can share it with others by lending, as I shall gladly do to you. And this brings us to the subject on which I especially wish to have a chat with you to-night. Take that chair, Westcroft, and we will sit here and have our talk."

Mark sat down in the easy-chair pointed out to him. From it he could look through the open window across the broad lawn, with its groups of graceful shrubs and bright plots of flowers, to the circle of wooded hills beyond, which were now lit up by the last beams of the setting sun; and he thought how different all this was to the dark lodging which he had lately occupied in a back street of London.

"The other night," began Mr. Darrell, "we were speaking of the want of something to occupy their brains, common among our working friends in the village. Now, cannot you and

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I, as reading and thinking men, do anything to help them?"

"Please do not compliment me in that way," said Mark. "I know my own ignorance too well. I do not suppose that I could do or think of anything, sir; but I should much like to hear what you think about it."

"I believe, Westcroft, that you may do a great deal. In what manner I will tell you by-and-by. Have you been long enough in Blendon to know how the people spend their leisure time—their evenings?"

"In their gardens, or on their allotments, as a rule."

"An employment at once pleasant, profitable, and praiseworthy. Reformers, such as you and I, can neither wish nor hope to win them from it. But what when winter evenings come?"

"I have never been in the country in the winter."

"I suppose not. I imagine, that to the labourers the winter evenings must be dull and tedious, and when they come will be our time to work."

"Have you tried a reading-room, sir?"

"You are on the right track, Westcroft. It was of something of that kind that I was think-

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ing. No, we have not tried one in Blendon, as yet."

"But they have been started in villages as well as in towns?"

"Oh yes, often; but not always with complete success—the result, possibly, of their having, in many cases, been set going in an inefficient manner. They have been most successful, I believe, as places of harmless recreation, where men amuse themselves with looking at newspapers and playing at mild games. This is, of course, a useful purpose in its way; but it is scarcely the one of which we were speaking."

"Not exactly, sir. But what should you propose to do?"

"In the first place I propose to give our undertaking a claim to success by launching it with a complete equipment. As we wish to attract our friends, we will fit our rooms so as to give more comfort than is to be found, not only in any cottage, but in any inn parlour. We will have them thoroughly warmed and lighted. And for the benefit of those who come, we will have a plentiful library of such suitable books as are really worth reading."

"You speak of rooms. Should you need more than one?"

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"Yes; according to my scheme we should have two rooms—an outer one for newspaper readers and players at quiet games, such as chess, draughts, and dominoes. In this room talk should be permitted and encouraged within decent bounds."

"And the other room?"

"Our inner room will be for those who really wish to read, and must be kept quiet."

"Shall you not find it difficult, sir, to persuade the young men to leave the outer room for the sake of reading good books in the other?"

"Probably; yet I trust that it may be done in some cases. However, I shall not attempt to use my own powers of persuasion on them. That I shall leave to the librarian."

"Then you will have a librarian to manage the undertaking?"

"Yes. You might have asked *who* the librarian is to be."

"May I ask now?"

"As you have a personal interest in the question, you may. I intend offering the post to you. Certain advantages will be connected with it. The librarian will have the run of the books, and considerable influence as regards

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ordering any new ones for which he may wish. Moreover, a fair salary will be paid to him."

"Thank you, sir. I should be delighted to have such a post."

"Yes, I think it will suit you; and as you will be wanted in the evening only, it will not interfere with your work. But I must tell you that you will be expected to do something more than merely keep order and take care of the books. I want personal influence brought to bear on the younger fellows. I want you to try if you cannot rouse some laudable curiosity and desire for information in them. I should gladly make the attempt myself, if I could do so with any hope of success. But I cannot; the very sight of the squire's face would make them sheepish and silent. But you will come to them as one of themselves. They will talk freely with you. I hope much from your efforts."

"At least, Mr. Darrell, I will try and carry out your wishes."

"I feel sure that you will. The task may be a delicate and difficult one, but the end to be gained makes it worth attempting. My idea is that you will do well to make yourself acquainted with all the youths and young men who come to the rooms, and, so far as you can, that you

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should gain their confidence. You will thus find out the natural bias of each one's mind—if he has any special bias—and we can put such books in his way as will be most likely to interest and amuse his particular faculties. Surely, among all our young fellows, we shall find some who have a leaning towards some form of intellectual occupation; and one reader may induce others to read."

"I see your meaning," said Mark, "but I distrust myself. I have not the power of reading people's minds, nor have I the tact to talk to them as you do."

"Your diffidence," returned Mr. Darrell, "is natural, and I think none the worse of you for it. I have, of course, lived some few years longer in the world than you, and have, I expect, seen more of it. In the many talks we must have over this scheme, I must help you with the results of my experience; and for the rest, I do not think that you have any sufficient grounds for doubting your own powers."

"I have only to learn your views, and act as your mouthpiece?"

"Rather more than that. Your special knowledge of the class with which you have to deal will, I hope, render my views much more to the

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purpose than they could be if expounded by myself. When our project is once set afloat, we shall find many ways in which it may be pushed forward. For instance, say that you can find means to interest a few youths in one of your own pursuits, say botany, we might stimulate them by offering a prize for a complete collection of the wild plants of the parish ; or if they could be made to take pleasure in natural history, we might give them a weekly reading, aloud, from some interesting book on the subject, such as Warton's Essays or White's "Selborne," illustrating it not merely with plates, but with actual specimens from Harry Gale's collection ; or—— But all these matters are details for discussion at some future time when we are likely to want them. The arrangements of our rooms will have first to be settled."

"Shall you begin to make the arrangements soon, sir ?"

"As regards the rooms ? No ; winter is not here yet. But there are some things which might be settled. The list of books to be provided will need careful consideration. We might begin to prepare it ; and here your experience as to what is read most eagerly by the working men in towns will help us much.

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And I may as well tell you now, that under a few general directions from me, most of the work of getting the rooms in order will fall on your shoulders, as I shall be away from this place much of the later summer and autumn."

Mark again expressed his readiness to devote himself to the work, and to do his best to carry out Mr. Darrell's plans. Afraid of wearying his future helper, Mr. Darrell now turned the conversation to other topics, and said no more about his scheme that evening.

Our young shoemaker returned to Blendon in high spirits. His visit to the Court had to him been a most delightful one. It had given him a cause of satisfaction such as he could scarcely have hoped for. In more ways than one he was charmed with Mr. Horace Darrell's plan. There was now no longer reason to fear that winter evenings in the country would be long or dreary. Books he would have in abundance, and useful work connected with books to occupy him. Nor was it without satisfaction that he thought of the salary belonging to his post as a means of enabling him to do more for his mother. But most of all he rejoiced to think that he would be engaged as the helper and right hand of a gentleman for whom he had conceived so great

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a love and admiration as for Mr. Horace Darrell.

In this happy frame of mind he walked homewards. All these pleasant things appeared to him as certainties. He did not remember how a very ancient proverb tells us that "There's many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip!"

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CHAPTER X.

GOING THE ROUNDS.

MUCH as Mark's mind now became occupied with his future prospects, he did not neglect his new friend, Harry Gale. In the course of the next two or three weeks he paid more than one pleasant visit to the keeper's lodge, and soon afterwards had the promised privilege of going with him one evening on his rounds.

Mark had expected much pleasure from doing this, and he was not disappointed. It made him acquainted with the haunts of many wild creatures, and gave him glimpses into their habits which he might have been long in finding out for himself. There were also many wild and secluded spots in wood and waste into which Gale led him, which interested him greatly, but to which he could, if alone, have

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found his way only by the merest chance. Added to this, he was shown all the art and mystery of trapping, he learnt how stoats and weasels are ready to pay with their lives for the trifling privilege of running through a wooden tunnel, and how empty egg-shells alone are needed to lure magpies and hedgehogs to their destruction.

By this time Mark was so far grown familiar with the gamekeeper that, in the course of their walk, he mentioned to him his adventure in the dark lane, on the night of his first coming to Blendon. Harry fully agreed in his own opinion that the warning had been meant for Arthur Westcroft; and from the slight description which Mark was able to afford of the person who accosted him, he could give a sufficiently shrewd guess as to whom that person was.

"It was Ted Myers," said Harry; "not a doubt about it."

"And who was, or is, Ted Myers?" asked Mark.

"Ted? Oh, he's a clever fellow enough; but as bad a lot as need be. He has a way of getting some sort of hold on younger men, and making them carry out any mischief that he may plan, whilst he is generally cun-

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ning enough to keep himself out of harm's way."

"Was he a friend of my cousin?"

"Ted had got young Arthur Westcroft under his influence, as he had several more young men, and was, I should say, the chief cause of his going wrong. An old hand at poaching, was Ted; and if people give him no more than his due, he was ready for anything else that was bad."

"Was he engaged in the affair that caused my cousin to leave Blendon?"

"He was suspected, but we had nothing clear against him. He did not leave the neighbourhood when your cousin and the others did; but he was missing much about the time that you came. It's my belief that he was anxious to frighten your cousin Arthur away for fear that if he were taken he might let out something against himself. Any way, he has thought well not to show his face here since."

"If he came again, would Mr. Darrell prosecute him?"

"If there were anything plain against him he would. Ted is a marked man, a pest to the neighbourhood; he has been the ruin of so many young fellows."

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"His is a bad case; but would the squire be as severe with all poachers?"

"Our Mr. Horace is not what I should call severe with them, though in a way he's strict. He won't allow the law to be broken if he can help it, and against any lawless act accompanied with violence he specially sets himself. But he's not vindictive. When an offence has once blown over, if it is nothing worse than ordinary poaching, he's easily persuaded to let it pass."

The reader may easily imagine what was passing through Mark's mind during this conversation. There was a little pause at the end of Harry's last words, and then Mark said rather nervously, "Do you think, Mr. Gale, that if my cousin Arthur were to come back, Mr. Darrell could be induced to overlook his offence?"

"Why do you ask me that?" returned Harry.

"Because I should very much like to have him come back."

"You would?" rejoined the keeper, in a tone of surprise.

"Yes. Chiefly on account of my uncle and aunt. His being away is a great trouble to them. Do you think Mr. Darrell could be brought to forgive him?"

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The keeper reflected for a moment. "If," he said, "you want a straightforward, honest answer to your question, Mark Westcroft, I'm bound to say 'Yes.' The squire would consider the time that had passed, and Arthur's youth, and our having no other charge against him; and what's more, if you asked it, he'd be pleased to do a favour to you—for you are in his good books, I can tell you."

"Then you would advise me to ask him?"

"I didn't say that. If I give you advice, it will be not to meddle in the matter. I know but little of that cousin of yours, so we'll hope there is more good in him than I have ever heard of; but be that as it may, now he's gone, I'd leave well alone, and let him stay away. The country is as well without him; whilst as to yourself——"

"You are under a mistake, Mr. Gale. It is not because he is a friend of mine that I want him back. I have never seen him since we were quite young boys, and then he was bigger than me and bullied me."

"That was not my meaning, Mark Westcroft. I was not thinking of his coming back making it any pleasanter for you—quite the other way. You are in a manner standing in his shoes at

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Blendon. I can't say what he may be, for, as I said, I know but little of him; but if he happened to be a nasty, spiteful fellow, he might make things very disagreeable for you. Depend upon it, Blendon is best without him."

Mark laughed, and said that he was not afraid of quarrels between his cousin and himself. As he did not care to pursue the subject further, he changed the conversation by making some remarks on the scene around them. They were walking through a part of the wood which he had not before visited, and had reached a deep hollow, in the bottom of which was a small space of open greensward, perhaps a quarter of an acre in extent, whilst on three sides around them rose steep banks covered with wood.

"This," said Mark, "is just such a place as one reads of in story books. Something strange or mysterious ought to have happened here."

"Something curious there has been here; but I never heard of anything mysterious happening in Owls' Hall Bottom."

"What do you call this spot?" inquired Mark.

"Owls' Hall Bottom, that is the name it goes by."

"A curious name."

"It is; and a curious thing I was going to tell

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you about it. Out on this bit of open grass there used to stand a great elm tree. It must have been standing here for hundreds and hundreds of years. It was one of the biggest and oldest trees in the country. Not only the trunk, but even the branches, were hollow. It was the owls' hall. Owls had sheltered and bred in it for untold generations."

"Why was it cut down?"

"It was not cut down; but when I was a boy it had grown to be a mere shell, and one stormy night it came down bodily."

"And the owls had to find a new mansion."

"Yes. But the curious thing about it was the vast quantity of fur and bones of mice which the owls, in so many years, had collected in the hollow of the tree. There was a mass of this rubbish which would almost have filled a cart."

Mark had read of such huge collections having been found in hollow trees; and now the two naturalists, being fairly engaged with the habits of owls, needed no other topic of conversation for some time. Before this interesting subject was exhausted they had climbed out of the hollow and reached the top of the high bank which rose between Owls' Hall Bottom and Harry Gale's lodge. Their path now lay

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through plantations of larch trees of comparatively recent growth.

"These fir woods," said Mark, "have a peculiar beauty of their own, yet on the whole they are not to be compared to the real English woodland, with its great trees and hazel thickets below them. I do not like this spot so much as Owls' Hall Bottom."

"May be not," replied Harry. "And, if you don't like these larch spinneys, I have had reason for downright hating the very sight and name of them."

"Hating these fir plantations! Why?"

"Well, you see, the young pheasants, which we rear by hand down in my paddock yonder, always take to some part or other of these larch spinneys for a roosting-place when they get strong enough. Now, last season, I reared a splendid head of young birds. Very proud I was of them, till one night the poachers came up into the spinneys here, and cleared them right off. They hardly left a bird. You may be sure I was pretty much vexed. I hated having to come this way for weeks after."

"But how could the poachers kill so many birds without your knowing that they were here?"

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"Without knowing, do you say? Oh, I knew well enough. I was not asleep. I was looking on most of the time, and that made it so hard to bear."

"And yet you did not prevent the slaughter?"

"I could not. I had only Watts, one of the under keepers, and a watcher with me; and there were at least a dozen poachers, many of whom carried guns. They threatened to shoot us if we meddled with them, and they were such a set of ruffians that they would have done it. If there had been any chance of a fair fight we would have set on them, but as it was it would have been madness to interfere."

"Who were the poachers?—not Blendon men, or you would have known them?"

"Strangers; roughs from Reekingham, or out of the Black Country."

"But how would strangers know where to find your pheasants at night?"

"They take care to have friends here that watch the birds to roost, who show them where to find them. I am pretty sure there were one or two Blendon men out that night, but, if so, they were so well disguised that we could not be certain of them. I suspect Ted Myers of having had a finger in the matter, and,

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perhaps, another man; but when there are no proofs it is best not to name names. Those whose voices we might have known took good care not to speak."

"And did you venture near enough to the ruffians to talk to them, Mr. Gale?"

"I didn't waste many words on them; but they were rather free of their tongues in setting us at defiance, and some very rough language they used. There was one fellow in particular —a great brawny scoundrel, who looked as if he might have been an iron-puddler—who seemed to be their leader and chief spokesman. He was very liberal in his promises as to what he'd do to me and my men if we came near them; and before they went he was so kind as to say that they meant to come again next year."

"What an impudent fellow! And did they all get clear off with their booty?"

"They had the birds, but they did not *all* get clear off—that was my only comfort. We took one of them."

To Mark, who had never before listened to such a story of adventure from a person who had actually been engaged in it, Harry's narrative was most exciting; and he eagerly asked how this solitary poacher could have been

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captured without the keepers being murdered by his companions.

"Why, you see," said Harry Gale, "though they threatened to shoot us like rabbits if we tried to follow them, we dogged them for some distance through the wood. It so happened that one of the fellows had hurt his foot, and lagged behind a bit, so we pounced on him."

"But did he not call to his friends for help?"

"Once or twice; but I soon had my handkerchief in his mouth, and we dragged him among the bushes, and kept him quiet. The others came back to bring him off. Wild they were; and we could hear them saying what they would do for us. But we kept still, so they didn't find us, and had to go off without their friend."

"That was fine. I should have liked to have been in that piece of fun with you. What did you do with your man?"

"He got a year's imprisonment; but he did not live to serve his time out. He fell sick, and died in gaol."

"I should have thought that you might have learnt from him who the other fellows were, and so have taken the whole gang."

"We hoped to do so; but that man was as

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obstinate as a mule. We could get nothing out of him, except that his name was Smith, and that he was a tailor at Gorsham, which we knew to be false. It was plain that he was a Black Country man; and from things found on him I fancy his name was Joseph Clinker."

After a little pause Mark asked, "Do you think they will come again, this autumn?"

"Likely enough," said Harry, "for we shall have a finer rear of birds this time than ever. But if I can only get aware of them soon enough they are welcome to come; I shall be ready. More than a dozen good fellows have promised to stand by me whenever I want them; and the poachers won't have the birds next time without a fight."

Mark's imagination was not a little excited. A battle between poachers and gamekeepers in a wood at midnight might be as stirring an incident as any adventure that he had read of in books; and here was such a thing likely to happen close to his own home.

"Mr. Gale," he said, "would you let me be one of your party if the poachers should come?"

"To be sure I would," returned Harry, "and glad to have you. A stout young fellow such as you are ought to be worth the having; and I

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felt your strength when I first caught you yonder. If your courage holds good for it, you may depend on our letting you know when the time comes."

By this time the keeper's door had been reached, where Mrs. Gale stood, smiling, to receive them. Proud as that good woman doubtless was of her bold and resolute husband, a possible deadly struggle with poachers was scarcely a fit subject for her ears; so the talk turned to other matters till Mark said good-night, and went home.

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CHAPTER XI.

A DOUBTFUL GOOD.

THAT a gamekeeper should bear no good-will towards a poacher seemed to Mark Westcroft to be so much a thing of course that Harry Gale's objections to his cousin's return were not worth taking into consideration. Much more to the purpose was the latter's assurance that Mr. Horace Darrell might easily be prevailed upon to pardon the offender. So, not wisely, perhaps, yet with the best and kindest intentions, Mark proceeded to carry out his own views.

As yet, however, he said nothing about the matter to any of his relations.

Only a few days passed before he had another interview with his patron. He had prepared a number of suggestions about books for the library, which he carried to Mr. Darrell, and they

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had some talk with regard to them. When this business had been settled, Mark made his request.

It was, as the keeper predicted, readily granted. Mr. Horace Darrell knew how to grant a favour gracefully, and in a manner which seemed to double its value. It was a pleasure to him to oblige Mark, he said, and a pleasure to do anything which might show his regard for George Westcroft, for whose character he had the highest respect. He only hoped that after the warning he had had, Arthur Westcroft would do nothing more that was unworthy of his father's son.

Mark's joy at his success was somewhat lessened when, on his return home, he told what had passed to his mother and Uncle Barnet. Neither of them seemed in any way to share in his gratification at the prospect of Arthur's return. The carpenter did not indeed express his disapproval in words—such was not his habit—but the monosyllables which he muttered to himself, and the gravity with which he shook his head, were quite sufficient to indicate it.

Nor, in the presence of her brother, did Mrs. Westcroft say much, though she looked troubled. Yet before Mark went to bed she found an

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opportunity of speaking to him privately. It was, for his sake that she was alarmed. She chiefly dreaded his having Arthur for a companion. She feared that the principles of her good and steady lad would be corrupted by the wild cousin. She entreated him not to mention what the Squire had said to any but themselves; and not to let uncle and aunt George know that the return of their son would be permitted.

Mark, of course, could not promise to do as she wished.

Her fears were but natural; and in supposing that Mark would be in danger from his cousin's return she was in a manner right. Whether the danger was of exactly the kind which she dreaded we shall see in due time.

But when Mark went to work next morning, and told his news in George Westcroft's house, it was far differently received. He had not over-estimated the longing of the old couple for their son. It was chiefly to give them pleasure that Mark had procured Arthur's pardon, and he now in some sort had his reward. The prospect of again having her darling boy made Aunt Westcroft almost beside herself for joy. She laughed and cried by turns.

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And, if less demonstrative, the shoemaker was scarcely less delighted. At the moment, the possibility of his son again going wrong seemed not to occur to him. But even in the midst of his joy the old man's sense of justice, and his desire to do right, might have been remarked. "Arthur's coming home," he said to Mark, "shall make no difference to you. So long as you continue to be the good lad you have been, you will keep your regular place in the shop. There's plenty of work for you both at present; but if business should be slack, and one have to turn out, he will have to go—not you."

If the whereabouts of Arthur Westcroft had been unknown to the keeper and to his father, it was not to his mother. She knew the quarter to which to send the good news, and in the course of a few days Arthur Westcroft again made his appearance in his native village. The two cousins had not seen each other since their boyish quarrels of ten years ago; yet when they now met much friendliness was shown on both sides. Mark, on his part, desired to be friendly; it would please his uncle and aunt, and perhaps be for Arthur's good; whilst Arthur, though really jealous of Mark, who had,

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as he considered, usurped his own place, was too cunning to let his real feelings appear, and had, moreover, reasons for wishing to gain his cousin's confidence.

Several weeks passed by, and the two young men, working daily in the same shop, necessarily became in some sort intimate. Yet it is to be doubted if there was much real companionship between them; there was, in truth, too wide a difference in all their thoughts, interests, and principles to admit of it.

Yet, whilst he felt this, Mark still tried to keep up as much of friendship as was possible; and even in their leisure hours Arthur was to some extent thrown on his society. Arthur's old comrades had fortunately been obliged to leave the village, so that he could not amuse himself with them. Sometimes he would go with Mark on his evening rambles; but it was impossible to disguise the fact that he found no pleasure in those objects of interest of which the latter was in pursuit. These walks were generally by roads or footpaths, for Mark did not feel justified in taking him through the woods and private places where he had himself permission to go; and if they came near a public-house Arthur would commonly propose that they

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should go in. But not more than once or twice did he succeed. Mark found the insides of these places so insufferably dull that he was not to be induced to go again.

As the autumn came on Arthur's interest in natural-history rambles suddenly grew warm. He tried to get Mark to let him go with him into the wood, and when the latter declared that this was impossible, he began to drop hints that if Mark would in his walks in that direction make careful observations as to the haunts and quantity of the game, and report what he saw to him, he should find it to his profit.

These hints were at first obscure, and Mark did not perceive his meaning. Arthur then spoke more plainly, and gave him to understand that he still kept up correspondence with a gang of poachers; that he wished Mark to act as a spy for them, which, favoured as he was by the Squire, he would be able to do without hindrance or suspicion; and that, without taking any part or risk in the actual carrying off of the game, he should have a good share of the proceeds.

At the idea of such an act of treachery towards his two best friends, Mr. Darrell and Harry Gale, Mark showed an amount of horror

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which his cousin had not looked for. He told him plainly that he neither could nor would have the slightest connection with the business. With an earnestness which Arthur had not before seen, he begged him to renounce all connection with the poachers, and charged him with base ingratitude in acting as he was now doing after profiting by Mr. Darrell's kindness, and by his own good offices.

On this occasion Arthur got angry. He called his cousin some ugly names, threatening to ruin him in his father's good opinion, and to make him glad to turn his back on Blendon. But this was soon over. He speedily had his temper under control again. He then professed to be sorry for what he had said. He declared that his poaching scheme meant nothing, and that in future he really desired to keep free of bad companions, and to be guided by his cousin's good advice.

Mark naturally had his doubts of Arthur's sincerity, yet he could not do otherwise than accept his excuses; and they remained, at least outwardly, on much the same terms as before.

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CHAPTER XII.

MISCHIEF.

SO the summer passed away, and notwithstanding the above unpleasant circumstances which had arisen out of Arthur's return, that summer had been on the whole the brightest and happiest that Mark had known. He had enjoyed country pleasures as they can only be enjoyed by one who has long been shut up in a great town. He had found a happy home and kind friends at Blendon. From his acquaintance with Harry Gale he had derived no small amount of gratification. As time went on their intimacy had greatly increased. His visits to the Lodge and his rambles with the keeper were always sunny spots in his life, and it was pleasant to look forward to a continuance of them.

But of much more importance had been the

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advantages which he had derived, and seemed likely to derive, from the friendship of Mr. Horace Darrell. The regard which that gentleman showed for him was the source of much beyond mere pleasure. To feel himself respected by one for whom he entertained so profound and so well-deserved an admiration increased Mark's own self-respect; it rendered him anxious still further to improve himself, and it strengthened his resolution not to lower himself by any mean or unworthy conduct.

During the pleasant evenings of that summer Mark had held many consultations with Mr. Horace over the proposed scheme. He had heard, and his mind had grasped, most of that gentleman's plans for the good of the Blendon people, and he had caught something of his patron's enthusiasm for the work.

An old farmhouse in the village, which belonged to the Darrells, and which offered suitable accommodation, had been fixed on for the purposes of the proposed reading-room. Some cases of books had already arrived, and workmen were beginning to make the necessary alterations.

Both books and repairs were under Mark's charge, for Mr. Horace Darrell was away from

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the Court, and was not expected back for several weeks. Meanwhile Mark was happy to feel that he was working as his representative; and it was pleasant to look forward to Mr. Darrell's return, to hope for his approval of all that had been done, and to imagine the reading-room in actual operation.

It was in this autumn season that Mark one evening walked up to the keeper's lodge. For several days past he had been too busy to go there. He found Harry at home, and their talk as usual ran chiefly on matters connected with natural history. As Mark was about to leave the keeper said to him, "Of course you have the Squire's leave to go wherever you like, yet just at this time of year I should be glad if you could keep away from the larch spinneys at nightfall."

"Certainly, if you wish it," returned Mark. "In fact, it is a part of the wood that has but little attraction for me. I rarely go there."

"Why, Watts, the under keeper, told me he had seen you there more than once."

"He must either have been mistaken, or it could not have been very lately."

"I am not sure about the time," said Harry, "but I will ask him again."

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"I think you must have misunderstood him about it's being me; but in any case you need not be afraid of my disturbing the pheasants after this, unless I walk in my sleep," returned Mark, laughing.

So he went home, and for the present thought no more of the matter. At a later time, however, he had sufficient reason for remembering it. Mark was engaged on the evenings that followed, and some time passed before he again saw the keeper.

Notwithstanding the events mentioned at the close of last chapter, the relations of the two cousins towards each other had remained apparently much the same as they had been before. In their leisure time, it is true, they saw less of each other than formerly; but in business hours they worked amicably side by side in the shop.

On Gorsham market-days it was George Westcroft's custom to visit that town and bring home his stock of leather and grindery. It was one of these days, and he was about to set out on one of these expeditions. The two young men were busy at their benches, Mark being engaged on a new pair of lady's walking boots which he had almost finished. Since Mark had

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been at Blendon his skill in the lighter branches of his craft had considerably extended his uncle's business.

The boots in question were for a new customer —a lady who was visiting in the neighbourhood; and she had urgently requested that they might be sent home to her in the course of that day. George Westcroft, therefore, before he started for Gorsham, told Mark that he must finish these boots and take them to their owner in the evening, at the same time handing him the bill for them, as the customer, Mrs. Trotter, had expressed a desire to pay at once.

Mark, of course, undertook to do as he was required, and Uncle George went on his way to Gorsham. But in course of the afternoon a messenger came from a person who was engaged to furnish some of the fittings for the library, to ask Mark to meet him that evening at the reading-room.

Mark knew that the business at the reading-room might demand considerable time, and the house to which the boots had to be carried was two miles from Blendon. He did not see how he was to attend to both matters; and as there was now little real cordiality between them, he scarcely cared to ask a favour of Arthur. The

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latter, however, relieved him from his difficulty by volunteering to take the boots.

Mark joyfully accepted the offer.

"But," said Arthur, "don't mention it to my father. He won't be pleased if I take your job home; and you had better sign your name at the foot of the bill."

Mark at once gave the required promise. And, perhaps thoughtlessly, he receipted the bill.

Next morning, before encountering his uncle, he made a point of seeing Arthur. He expected that the latter would at once hand him the money for the boots, but in this he was disappointed. It was not till he asked for it that Arthur said that he had not brought it—that Mrs. Trotter had left her friend's house, and would not return for a week; but that at the end of that time the money could be had for fetching.

"I will fetch it then," said Mark; "it was very kind of you to go last night, and I will not give you more trouble. Perhaps you will give me the bill?"

"I left it with the boots," replied Arthur. "They told me to do so. They said it would be all right."

Mark felt vexed with his cousin for being so careless, but there was nothing in Arthur's

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manner to make him suspect anything worse than carelessness; and as his promise to Arthur forbade him to tell the whole story, he gave his uncle to understand that the boots had been safely carried home, and that he was to fetch the money in a week.

The old shoemaker showed some surprise. It was strange, he said, after making so great a point of wishing to pay at once, that the lady should not have sent the money. But he made no further remark on the subject.

A week passed, and Mark then himself walked to the house of Mrs. Trotter's friend. He asked the maid who opened the door to tell Mrs. Trotter that according to her orders Mr. Westcroft's nephew had called for the money for her boots.

The girl stared at him, and went in; and Mark overheard her tell her mistress, when she repeated her message, that Mr. Westcroft's nephew had called "again."

"Again!" thought Mark. "Could Arthur have given my name instead of his own? But perhaps he thought it better to do so, as he was on my business, and as my name was signed to the bill."

The lady's answer, which Mark also caught, was less satisfactory—"Mrs. Trotter paid the

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money, Mary, when she received the boots, and you saw her do so. However, you can tell the young man that she has left the neighbourhood, and will not return."

"I have been played a vile trick," thought Mark, as he turned from the door. "Arthur wanted the money for some purpose of his own, and has kept it. After serving me in that manner, it was a shame of him to send me here on a fool's errand. But I will talk to him, and make him repay every penny."

He carried out his intention of taxing Arthur with the act, but his cousin assumed a very different tone to that which he had expected. He calmly persisted in the truth of his original story, and declared that Mark, in his recent visit to the house, must have got the money, and was now endeavouring to keep it for his own use by bringing a false accusation against him.

They parted; Mark feeling himself not a little aggrieved, and determined to expose Arthur, and force him to refund the money.

To prove that he had received it, seemed to Mark at the moment a simple thing; yet with calm reflection he saw that this, perhaps, might not be so easy. Arthur, he found, had for his own reasons put off taking the boots till twilight;

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and long before twilight set in, and for two hours after dark, Mark had been shut up alone in that otherwise empty house—in the future reading-room—absorbed in the delightful work of opening packages of new books, and dipping here and there into their contents. As no one had seen him through those hours, how could he prove that he had not done his errand himself? The servant maid had not known him from his cousin; and then there was his own signature to the bill. In the face of Arthur's assertions to the contrary it might be very hard to make the truth appear.

And even if he succeeded, what would be gained? It was not upon Arthur that the chief punishment would fall. He would not feel the disgrace of exposure; that would rather have to be borne by his parents—especially by proud, honest George Westcroft. Mark felt that he could not be the means of bringing such trouble and sorrow upon his uncle's head.

So, after taking some days to consider the matter, his final resolution was to say nothing more about it to any one; to find the missing money from his own pocket, and to be extremely guarded in all intercourse with his cousin in future.

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To a young man in his position the value of a pair of new boots was no light matter. Happily, Mark was thrifty, and took good care of his earnings, so that he was able to find the money required.

When he handed this money to his uncle he could not help feeling and showing some embarrassment; for, however good were the intentions with which he acted, there was about the transaction something that was not open or straightforward. Nor did his uncle's manner tend to reassure him. There was in it, and in the expression of the old man's face, a something which seemed to indicate that he knew more about the affair than he cared to say.

And such was indeed the case. George Westcroft was far from knowing all, yet he knew much more than Mark was aware of. The lady of the house in which Mrs. Trotter had stayed, in writing to her friend, had mentioned Mark's coming, a second time as it seemed, to demand payment for the boots. And upon this Mrs. Trotter had at once sent an indignant letter to Mr. Westcroft, enclosing the receipted bill.

Had George Westcroft at once produced this letter, and charged his nephew with retaining the money, the whole truth, so far as Mark could

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have made himself believed, would have come out. But this the worthy shoemaker shrank from doing. He had, as we know, a tenderness for Mark. He did not wish to be hard on the first offence of one whose general conduct had hitherto been so good. He thought that Mark might have strong reasons for wishing to have the use of this money for a few days; and if he had the honesty to refund it within a reasonable time, George was content to let the matter pass quietly over; though, of course, he could never think quite so well of his nephew afterwards.

But George Westcroft did not succeed in keeping the affair so quiet as he had intended. Whether his wife saw Mrs. Trotter's letter, and spoke of it imprudently to her neighbours, or whether Arthur may have pried it out, and maliciously made its contents known, it would be hard to say; but certain it is that the story got wind, and was reported from mouth to mouth through Blendon, with various alterations, additions, and embellishments. It was confidently reported, and came to the ears of those nearest and dearest to Mark, and even to his own, that he had habitually embezzled his master's money, and would doubtless have been sent to penal servitude, had not Master Westcroft consented to

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hush the matter up because the defaulter was his kinsman.

Knowing, as we do, Mark's temperament, we may be sure that this calumny was not an easy thing for him to bear; and, as misfortunes seldom come alone, he soon learned that it had been supplemented by a second. The new slander was, that he had associated himself with the poachers, and was acting as their spy. Watts, the under keeper, declared positively that he had two or three times observed Mark lurking at nightfall about the larch spinneys, where he was evidently taking careful observations of the roosting places of the pheasants. On one of these occasions Watts had been so near to his back as to be able to speak positively to the plaid pattern on Mark's jacket.

When Mark first became aware of this second charge against him, he remembered that for some time past Harry Gale had behaved towards him with marked coolness. This was now explained—Harry believed that he could be base enough to act as a spy. And in this case, too, though he knew himself to be wholly innocent, it seemed impossible for him to clear himself.

He felt morally certain that it was Arthur who

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had been seen. Arthur had as good as told him that he was still connected with a gang of poachers. Arthur knew of the permission which he had to wander at will through the wood, and taking advantage of their singular likeness to each other, he had doubtless succeeded in personating him. Even the plaided jacket Mark could explain to his own satisfaction. He was accustomed to keep a spare coat at his uncle's for use in bad weather. Arthur had doubtless worn this coat, as well as copying his dress in other particulars. It was possible that he might have adopted the same disguise when he took the boots home.

All this seemed plain enough to Mark, yet it might not be easy to make Harry Gale believe it, and proofs he had none to offer. Nor did he feel it possible to go to Harry and bring such a charge against his cousin, after he had himself been the means of procuring that cousin's return in direct opposition to the keeper's advice. Mark felt that his only course was to remain passive, and trust for justice to fortune and his innocence.

Yet for the present the young man's situation was a most unhappy one. He was disgraced, and his character was, as it seemed, utterly ruined

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in the eyes of the Blendon people; and few men were more sensitive than Mark as regarded a good name. Yet the evil report of the world in general was less painful to him than the knowledge that he had lost the good opinions of those two men among his equals whose esteem he valued most highly, namely, his uncle George and Harry Gale. Bitterer still was the thought that his patron and hero, Mr. Horace Darrell, must soon hear the scandal, and that he would then cast him off as one unworthy his friendship.

And this blow, which seemed all that was wanting to complete Mark's misery, was not long in falling. Mark received a message which told him that he had lost Mr. Darrell's confidence. It was not given in a letter to himself, but sent through the steward of the estate. It was to the effect that no further steps were to be taken with regard to the reading-room, but that all matters there were to remain as they were till Mr. Darrell's return home.

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CHAPTER XIII.

OUT IN THE DARK.

THE autumn, which for Mark Westcroft had begun with so much hope and happiness, was thus wearing gloomily onward, when one day, at the close of work, Mr. Westcroft told his nephew that he had a walk for him that evening. It was to a farmhouse in the very outskirts of the parish, to carry home some shoes for the young people, and to take the measure of the farmer himself.

They were alone in the shop, Arthur, for reasons best known to himself, not having been at work that day. Had he been present, George Westcroft would scarcely have said, in the significant tone that he did, "You are *not* to bring the money for these shoes, Mark—not if they offer it you." But even though there was no

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third person to hear it, this speech cut the innocent victim of suspicion to the quick.

Before starting Mark went home and had tea with his mother. So rapidly were the evenings now drawing in, that it was almost dark when the meal was ended. But the darkness by no means inclined the young man to object to his walk. His rambles had made him familiar with every lane and footpath in the parish; and in the present gloomy state of his mind, a long walk in the dark seemed to him better than one in the brightest sunshine. He slung the shoes across his shoulder, took a stout holly stick in his hand, and went off.

Furzemoor Farm, his present destination, was a lone farmhouse. From Blendon, the road to it lay for some distance beneath Oakenshaw Wood—not, however, along those lanes which Mark had threaded on the night of his coming from London, but up a much less frequented one on the opposite side of it, and afterwards by only a field road.

Mark might have gained the Wood Lane by following the regular horse-road; but this he did not do. He knew of a footpath which would take him into the lane more quickly, and, moreover, one so little used that there was no proba-

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bility of meeting any one in it, which, in his present frame of mind, he looked upon as an advantage.

He had gained the last field, and was within a hundred yards of the gate which opened into the lane, when he came to a spot where the path skirted an old marl pit. He was stepping lightly past this place, when the voices of two persons talking in a low tone reached his ears. Both voices struck him as familiar, and he instinctively stood still to listen.

The speakers seemed to be in close conversation in the bottom of the pit; and though they were at a considerable distance beneath him, the night was so still that many of their words were to be heard distinctly. The banks of the pit were so much overgrown with bushes that he could not have seen them, even had there been sufficient light for that purpose; and, what was more important, these bushes served to screen Mark from sight, who, standing out against the sky, might otherwise have been more easily seen by those below. One of the speakers was his cousin Arthur. The other voice at first perplexed him. He had heard it before, but was doubtful where or when. After a few words, however, he felt sure that the gruff

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tones were the same that had given him the mysterious warning on his walk from the station —that it was the man whom the keeper had called Ted Myers.

"That is all nonsense," he heard Arthur say. "It is not likely that I should square up with the keepers and want to peach. It is that white-livered cousin of mine, Mark, that is thick with Gale; and he has been taken for me. *You* have mistaken us for one another before now, Ted."

Myers laughed, and spoke something which Mark could not catch. Then he heard him ask, "We may make quite certain of finding the birds just in the places that you told us of?"

Arthur seemed to answer in the affirmative, but his cousin could not catch his exact words.

"Well, then," said Myers, "we shall be all right. You know the time. Owls' Hall Bottom is the meeting-place—first come wait for the rest —and then all on to the larch spinneys."

"I will be there," returned Arthur.

"I mean to join company with the Reekingham fellows outside the wood," continued Myers, "and you might as well meet Clinker and the Forgehill chaps—they will come in by the old gate; but please yourself. And now I'm off."

The pair of confederates were about leaving

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the marl pit, and Mark, unwilling to be found listening, ran off towards the lane, taking care, however, to keep on the grass, that his footsteps might not be heard. From the broken conversation which had reached him, he had no doubt that the subject under discussion was a raid on Harry Gale's pheasants.

When safely in the lane he slackened his pace. "If," he thought, as he walked on towards Furzemoor, "if I had only heard on what night the poachers mean to come, I should have made a most important discovery; but as it is I have learned something worth knowing. It may be that I know enough to prevent mischief. To-morrow I will see Harry Gale; but first I will have a serious talk with Arthur. I need not say how I have learnt his secret, but I will let him see that I am informed of the lawless plot in which he is mixed up; and I will solemnly warn him to keep clear of it, as otherwise he cannot hope to escape punishment. By my doing this he may perhaps be saved from a great crime, and his parents from a great sorrow."

Mark's resolve was a good and a prudent one. But it often happens that circumstances render useless the very wisest of resolutions; and so it was to prove in the present case.

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Mark was unlucky in his errand. The farmer at Furzemoor was not at home; but it was expected that he would shortly be in, and the young shoemaker was asked to sit down and wait.

He did so. He waited for half an hour—an hour—for two hours; but still his customer did not come. He was anxious to be on his homeward road; but after what his uncle had said to him at starting, he was desirous if possible of obeying his orders to the letter. At last the farmer came. He was a jovial, hospitable man, and when told how long Westcroft had been waiting, blankly refused to be measured till the young shoemaker had taken supper with him.

This of course consumed more time. It was after ten o'clock when Mark set out for home. Ten o'clock is but an early hour to townsfolk, but it is a late one to the villagers of Blendon. By that time all respectable people there are supposed to be snugly at home and in bed. Mark knew that he should be considered late by his mother, who would be sitting up for him; but that he could not help—the fault was none of his. Beyond his stout stick, he had now nothing to carry, so he strode briskly along. The night had been somewhat cloudy and dark when he

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came, but the sky had now cleared. An almost full moon was high enough to throw a bright light over the open ground, and the grass was growing white with hoar frost, and crushed crisply beneath his feet.

Mark's path, as we have seen, lay at first across fields, which were light and beautiful in the frosty air and clear moonshine. As he passed these fields he met no one, nor at that time of night did he expect to meet any one. Presently he entered the Wood Lane, which for half a mile and upwards ran close along the side of Oakenshaw Wood. Here, too, he expected perfect solitude, for few persons passed along it even by day, and to meet a vehicle of any kind in it was at any time a rare occurrence. Yet here it was otherwise than as he expected. He was not half way along it, when he distinctly heard the sound of coming wheels.

This was no very alarming sound, yet in that place and at that hour it seemed to him a thing so unusual, that he stood still to listen. The rumbling of wheels it certainly was, and they were drawing nearer to him. Evidently, too, the noise was caused by the wheels of more than one vehicle.

There was, too, a strange and suspicious cir-

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cumstance connected with these wheels—the usual accompaniment of the clatter of horses' feet was wanting. This puzzled Mark, and he began to have an uncomfortable and rather alarming suspicion that something was wrong. Knowing so much as he did, the nature of that something might have occurred to him; but it did not.

That part of the lane along which he had passed was straight for some distance; but it was much overhung by trees, and as the moon shone from the woodland side of the lane, she cast little or no light upon it. Though the vehicles which caused the noise could not be far distant, Mark looked back for some minutes before he could distinguish anything. It was only after straining his eyes that he became aware of an indistinct mass advancing towards him, and within a distance of fifty yards.

It so happened that he had halted on that side of the road which was towards the wood. He was, therefore, in shadow, and knew that he could not as yet have been seen by the coming individuals, whoever they might be. The spot at which he had stopped was close by a gate leading into one of the green drives of the wood. This was, as Mark thought, a fortunate circum-

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stance. He drew back into the recess formed by the gate, where he was in still deeper shadow than before, meaning to remain there unseen whilst the mysterious drivers passed by.

To the rumbling of the wheels, as they drew nearer, was now added a dull thumping of horses' feet, but one quite different from their usual brisk, metallic clatter. And Mark was at last able to make out what he saw with some degree of certainty. The dim mass shaped itself into two large spring carts, each containing several persons, and advancing one a little in front of the other. Now, too, he felt sure that the horses' feet were muffled that they might make as little noise as possible. As they came still nearer it appeared that both vehicles were slackening their pace as if to stop.

It was not till this moment that any idea of the character of the people in these carts, or of the nature of their business, flashed on Mark's mind. It now occurred to him that it must be this very night that Harry Gale's pheasants were to be slaughtered, and that these were the poachers.

They were beyond all doubt preparing to stop. This gate seemed to be their destination. Mark felt that, if they found him where he was

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now standing, they would probably take him for a spy, and might, considering to what a rough and lawless class of men they belonged, give him but rough handling. His best plan would be to slip through the gate into the wood, and there to hide himself among the bushes till they had passed on; after that, without a moment's loss of time, he must run off to Harry Gale's lodge, and give the alarm.

He hastened to put his resolutions into practice. He felt for the head of the gate and found the latch. He raised it, but in vain—the gate was locked. He would have jumped, but the gate was too high; he would have climbed it, but the top was guarded by high pointed pales which defied any such attempt. To have endeavoured to regain the road would have brought him before the very faces of the supposed poachers. Mark Westcroft was as completely trapped as ever had been any of Harry Gale's enemies, the stoats!

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CHAPTER XIV.

A POACHER BY COMPULSION.

MARK stood still by the gate, not knowing what to do.

"Hullo!" exclaimed one of the occupants of the first cart—in an undertone, however—as the vehicle drew up opposite, and Mark was discovered.

"Hullo!" replied Mark, with as much coolness as he could assume.

"And who are you?" demanded the speaker, whilst he, with three or four companions, jumped to the ground.

What answer to return Mark did not know. He was undoubtedly in a most awkward position. He knew how hard it would probably be to persuade these men that he was merely at the gate by accident; possibly, too, even if they believed him, they might not be any more inclined to spare him for that reason.

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But he was saved from the hazard of a reply, a second of the fellows exclaiming, but with the same precaution as before, "Why, don't you see it's the cobbler? How are you, Westcroft, my boy? how are you, Waxy? What's the game?"

This time Mark knew at once that he was mistaken for his graceless cousin; and at the moment he felt glad of it. It might possibly give him a chance of escape. He caught at that chance as a drowning man is said to catch at a straw. He knew that the tone of his voice greatly resembled that of his cousin, and he did his best to copy his manner of speaking.

"It's all right," he said. "I began to think you meant to keep me waiting here all night. Owls' Hall Bottom is the meeting-place. The Reekingham chaps are there before this."

"None of your cheek, Waxy," was the reply. "We are all in good time. So you came here to show us the way, did you? Bless you! we knowed it before. But it was kind o' you all the same; and I'll come to you to be measured for a pair o' watertights, one o' these days!"

At this piece of wit there was a low chuckle from the other poachers.

The second cart had now come up, and its occupants were dismounting. One of these

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men, who seemed to assume the position of captain of the party, produced a bunch of skeleton keys, and with one of them unlocked the gate. The carts were then drawn within the wood, and various matters unloaded from them, including three or four guns and bludgeons for the whole party.

Mark felt no doubt as to the company into which he had fallen. These were the persons of whom Myers had spoken as "the Forgehill chaps"—men from the iron-works and coal-pits of the Black Country. Just for the present he saw that he had no choice but to remain with them, but when they were once in motion towards the place of meeting, he proposed to slip away from them unseen, and carry his warning to the keeper. To his doing this, however, an obstacle was about to arise on which he had not calculated.

More than once he had noticed the fellow who had unlocked the gate glancing suspiciously in his direction. Presently that individual asked, in the same low tone in which the whole of their conversation was carried on, who the new pal was.

No sooner had he received an answer than he stepped up to Mark, and drawing him slightly

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aside, said, "So you are Arthur Westcroft, are you? I've heard a thing or two about you that these chaps don't know. You may be all square, or you may not; but any way I'll take precious good care that you don't lead us into any trap. You'll keep close by me, and if I see you make for playing us false, just you look here"—and he tapped the barrels of his gun. "I've a bit of a score to settle off with keeper Gale, and if he interferes with us he'd best look that he don't get one of these into him; but if I see you up to any tricks, the other will be for you, as sure as my name is Bill Clinker!"

Mark needed but a single glance at Mr. William Clinker to feel sure that he was the man to make good his threat if occasion offered. The difficulties of our friend's situation were thus greatly increased. It was now certain that he could only attempt to escape at the immediate risk of being murdered. Arthur's first words at the marl pit had hitherto been a puzzle to him, but he could now see their drift. They referred to an idea entertained by some of the leaders that he, Arthur, was in league with the keepers, and meant to betray the gang of poachers. Mark's own intimacy with Harry Gale, and his strong personal likeness to his

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cousin, must, as Arthur had said, have originated this idea. Hence Clinker's suspicions and threats. That unhappy likeness, thought poor Mark, had been at the bottom of all his troubles.

Poor Mark! He had once foolishly desired to see something of a poaching adventure. When speaking of it with Harry Gale, he had thought of it as a grand piece of fun. Here he now was, involved in one to an extent that he had never dreamed of! In spite of his principles, and against his will, it seemed likely that he might have to take part in the destruction of Mr. Darrell's game. A fray might take place, and he might be killed or injured whilst apparently standing on the wrong side; or he might be captured among those with whom he had so unwillingly become associated, and how then could he clear a character already darkened by suspicion? If the keepers should become aware of what was going on, Harry Gale might perhaps remember his promise, and send to Uncle Barnet's to summon him; his absence from home at such a time would seem another piece of evidence against him. Mr. Darrell, and Harry Gale, and all the world seemed likely to have such convincing proofs of his ingratitude

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and wickedness, that it would be vain to struggle against them.

Then there were other and more immediate grounds for fear. What would be his fate if the poachers discovered that he was not their genuine associate, but only a sham? They were not men to scruple at any outrage, and they might find him out at any moment. When Arthur joined the party, as he probably would do, Mark's deceit could be maintained no longer; and Arthur would have little power, even if he had the will, to shield him.

Such were the thoughts that passed through Mark's mind, as he stood silently watching the poachers whilst they made their preparations. At such times many things pass through the brain in a few minutes.

The horses were taken from the shafts and tied securely to trees, the carts being left standing on the turf. All was ready, and they were about to set out towards the place of meeting, when they were suddenly startled by the report of a gun. It was not indeed loud, nor near at hand, being away in the direction of Blendon village, yet it seemed to cause very considerable excitement among the poachers. They consulted eagerly together, their general opinion

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seeming to be that if this shot was not actually a signal, it would certainly have the effect of putting the keepers on the alert. Mark was questioned as to whether he could offer any explanation of the matter; but he, of course, could only give a negative answer.

One or two of the more faint-hearted of the poachers were even for making an immediate retreat now that the chances of discovery seemed to be so much increased. But these were overruled by the bolder spirits of the party, and were especially opposed by Clinker, who declared, with unnecessary oaths, that, having come thus far, he would not go back without game, though he had to face all the keepers in the county.

Accordingly they started on their march along the green alley before them. It led directly towards Owls' Hall Bottom, at which place Mark learned from their conversation, as he had before partly gathered from the words of Ted Myers, that they were to join a still larger party than their own, composed of town roughs from Reekingham.

Notwithstanding their recent alarm and its possible consequences, the poachers took all precautions in their power to avoid discovery.

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They moved forward almost as noiselessly as a file of Red Indians on the war-path. The herbage and fallen leaves, made crisp by the frosty air, might be heard crunching beneath their feet, or now and then the snapping of a rotten stick when trodden upon, or possibly a whispered word or two; but otherwise all was silence. So still was the night, that scarcely a withered leaf fluttered down from the trees. Not even an owl was hooting. The woods seemed to slumber under the bright, cold moon in perfect calm. It seemed scarcely possible to imagine that they might at any moment become the scene of a fierce and noisy conflict.

Many of the trees were already bare, more especially the elms; and ranged along the branches of some of the largest of these trees, as they were brought between the eye and the bright disc of the moon, might be seen the dusky forms of dozens of sleeping wood-pigeons; but so stealthily did the poachers pass on, that even these wild and shy creatures were undisturbed.

Clinker and Mark led the way, the former taking care that the latter did not move at more than an arm's length away from him. Mark had already concluded in his own mind that this

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ruffian was the same big iron-puddler who had defied Harry Gale on the former occasion. It seemed probable, too, that he was the brother of that Joseph Clinker who had been taken on that occasion, and who had afterwards died in prison; and this supposition would account for that hatred of the keeper and for those threats of vengeance against him to which he had given utterance.

Escape at present was impracticable. The chances might perhaps be greater when the larger party had been joined at Owls' Hall Bottom. Yet to the meeting at that place Mark looked forward with a certain amount of dread. Arthur would doubtless be there, and to keep up the present deceit would then no longer be possible. Even the existing state of painful uncertainty seemed preferable to the unknown catastrophe which must follow detection.

They drew near to Owls' Hall Bottom. Standing in the open space where the great elm had once grown, and grouped together in such a manner as to keep under the shadow of the surrounding trees, a number of men were dimly to be made out. There could not have been less than ten of them. As Mark came up with his own party, he looked nervously round for his

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cousin. It was not easy to make sure, yet he soon felt convinced that Arthur was not there. The difficulty which he found in ascertaining this was, not so much owing to the uncertain light, as to the means which some of the men had taken to disguise themselves. Several of the fellows had pieces of black stuff hanging from under their hats, which hid their foreheads, and thus greatly altered the appearance of their faces.

Among those thus masked Mark thought that he detected the man Myers. The person whom he suspected of being that worthy was at some distance, and evidently had not as yet noticed him. Arthur's absence, whatever might have been the cause of it, was a relief, since it put off the moment of detection; yet should this Myers recognize him, mischief might at once follow. Mark, therefore, turned from him as much as possible, and seeing one of the Reekingham men close by who had a spare piece of black stuff, he begged it from him, on the plea that he had accidentally lost his own. With this disguise there would be a chance of avoiding the eye of Myers, and he might even yet hope to get away without being found out.

Though Mark had only spoken to that effect

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at hazard, the Black Country party was really somewhat late. Time was precious. Little of it was wasted at the meeting-place, and the whole gang pushed forward towards the larch spinneys. Their way was the same that Mark had first trodden with his friend Harry. Little did he then think that he would ever have to traverse it with such companions and under such strange circumstances.

But Mark's hope of now escaping the vigilance of Clinker was ill-founded. That formidable person still kept as close beside him and still kept the same watchful eye on him as before. A few minutes would bring them to the roosting-place of the pheasants, and perhaps into collision with the keepers. Poor Mark's position grew more agonizing and hopeless with each moment.

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CHAPTER XV.

AN UGLY BUSINESS.

THE larch spinneys were reached, and as the moonlight streamed down through the thin trees, the poachers could see the birds which they had come so far to seek sitting motionless in their sleeping places—as tame, as stupid, and as helpless as so many barn-door fowls when at roost.

To take their game quietly, without giving an alarm and without disturbing the other pheasants, seemed to be an important object with the poachers. Not a shot was fired; but some of the men, old hands at the work, had light poles, to the ends of which nooses were fixed. These nooses they adroitly slipped over the heads of the birds, and thus brought them noiselessly to the ground, where other men

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killed them, and flung them into the bags brought for that purpose. Yet only a few were thus employed; by far the greater part of the gang merely kept watch; they had no share in the actual work, but had merely come to strengthen the party in case of interference from the keepers. All who carried guns stood thus on guard, and among these was Mr. William Clinker.

When the slaughter had begun, and the attention of the party had seemed centred on the birds, Mark had for a moment thought that escape was possible. He had tried quietly to move a little farther from Clinker; but a growl and a savage look from that worthy had speedily shown him that he was mistaken.

The work of destruction had not gone on for many minutes, and, compared with the number around them, only few birds had been killed, when the sport, if such it could be called, came suddenly to a pause. The shrill sound of a whistle rang through the wood, and every one stood still and listened. All guessed it to be a signal, and knew that they were discovered. It came from the thick underwood which bounded the larch plantation straight in front of them. Mark Westcroft recognized the sound at once—

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he had often heard that sound before. It was Harry Gale's dog-whistle.

The meaning of the signal was soon apparent—it was to bid the keepers and their friends close in upon the poachers. No sooner was it heard than the cracking of twigs and the sound of footsteps on all sides told the marauders that they were surrounded by a body of men equal, if not superior, in numbers to themselves. They drew together and prepared to stand on their defence.

Mark's heart beat thick and fast. The crisis of his adventure was come. When he assumed his disguise it was with the intention of throwing away the mask the moment that the keepers appeared, but now in his excitement he forgot all about it. Now at last was the time for making his escape. The present movement among the poachers seemed to favour his doing so. He sprang forward to run for that point from which he had heard the sound of the whistle.

Instead of being successful, the movement brought down Clinker's fury upon him. Clinker seemed to be now sure that it was Mark who had betrayed the party. He yelled to him to stand, and levelling his gun, declared, with a

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frightful oath, that he would shoot him for his treachery. Mark expected nothing less than that he would keep his word; and possibly in his rage he might have done so, had it not happened that at that moment his attention was drawn to another object.

The newer and more important object was Harry Gale, who just then stepped from among the thick underwood in front, and who had three or four men on each side of him. Neither the keeper nor those who accompanied him had any weapons beyond stout sticks, yet they seemed in no way alarmed by the guns of the poachers.

"Now, then, you fellows," he cried in his clear deep voice, "it will be better for you to give up quietly. You are caught this time. We are too many for you, and we mean to have you."

"Do you?" growled Clinker, in return. "We ain't so sure of that. You'd better try what you can do. Who do you call yourself? Are you keeper Gale?"

"My name is Henry Gale, and I am keeper here; so just you give up to lawful authority."

"Then you and I have an old score to settle, keeper Gale. You come five yards nearer me,

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and you shall see whether I mean to do it or not."

At the sight of Harry Gale and the first sound of his voice Mark had scarcely been able to refrain from dashing across to him, whatever might be the risk. Yet before making the venture he again looked towards his tyrant. What he saw was sufficient to change his purpose in an instant. Clinker's gun was no longer levelled at himself, but was now aimed at the breast of Harry Gale, who was steadily advancing. There was upon the poacher's face such a look of fixed hatred and revenge, as showed that he meant nothing less than deliberate murder, and he was indeed in the very act of drawing the trigger.

The stout holly stick which Mark had carried with him on his walk that evening was still in his hand. Expecting, as he did, that in another moment he would see his friend Harry murdered before his eyes, all thoughts of consequences vanished. Nothing but instant action could save Gale. Swinging his stick, he struck up the muzzle of Clinker's gun at the very moment that he fired, and the charge, instead of striking the honest keeper, went whizzing harmlessly away through the tops of the larches.

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Whether the second barrel would have been aimed at Harry or at himself, Mark did not wait to prove. What he did seemed a rash thing, and probably it was the mere instinctive impulse of a courageous mind, yet, had he had time to think, it was perhaps the most prudent thing that he could have done—he took the bull by the horns, so to speak, and threw himself bodily on Clinker.

Of course, in a prolonged tussle with that great, brawny cyclops of an iron puddler, a mere youth like Mark could have no chance; yet the suddenness of his attack gave him some slight temporary advantage. He had Clinker fast by the neck-cloth, not only before he could use his gun, but before he could strike a blow with his heavy fist; and they spun round and round together. Mark had some sort of vague hope that by throttling his antagonist he might succeed in bringing him down. The poacher made one or two efforts to strike his youthful assailant, but without success. He then grasped Mark tightly round the middle, and lifted him from his feet, and a moment afterwards the young man found that he came backwards against the earth with a shock that made his teeth chatter. He did not loosen his grip, however, but dragged Clinker down with

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him, and they continued to grapple upon the ground.

But by this time they were far from being the only combatants engaged. The discharge of Clinker's gun had been the unintentional signal for a general onset. No sooner had it been fired, than the keepers and their assistants had given a cheer, and rushed in from all sides. Other guns had gone off, either intentionally or otherwise, and a fierce hand-to-hand scuffle had set in. Where but a little before all had been so peaceful, there was now the most discordant uproar—the sound of blows, shouts, and oaths rang far through the woods, and the startled wild birds flew screaming away from their resting-places.

Mark heard something of what was going on around, but he knew nothing very distinctly. He could not be sure how long he continued to grapple with Clinker, for soon after his fall he had received a blow across the forehead, which had cut the skin, and not only bewildered, but blinded him, by filling his eyes with blood, yet after this he had still continued to fight on as best he might. Then for a time all around seemed to become a blank—he became, in fact, unconscious. But this could not have been for

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very long, for when he regained at least the partial use of his faculties, there were still sounds of strife, and he found himself making desperate but fruitless efforts to free himself of some person, whether Clinker or not, he could not tell, who held him down by pressing a knee upon his breast.

"Who have you there?" demanded a voice which sounded curiously familiar in his confused ears, and which struck him as strangely out of place among the ruffianly work around him.

"I don't know, sir," returned Mark's captor. "All I know is that, for a man that's pretty well smashed up, he can hit hard; so I thought I'd keep him down when he was down."

"Well, Watts, you can let him up now, and Gale can handcuff him."

The knee was removed from his chest, and Mark rose to a sitting posture. His brain was still in a state of bewilderment from the blows he had received on the head; nor did the blood, which still trickled into his eyes, allow him to see anything very distinctly. His bodily state was a pitiable one; but he had so far recovered his senses as to be conscious of a pang far keener than any mere bodily suffering. He knew that it was Harry Gale who stood by,

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ready to handcuff him, and that the voice he had heard was that of Mr. Horace Darrell; that he had been taken as a poacher in the very act, and that as such he must expect punishment and shame.

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CHAPTER XVI.

THE SKIES CLEAR.

AT his master's bidding, Harry Gale had come up to the place where Mark was lying. With clothes torn and soiled in the scuffle, with his face cut and smeared with blood, and with the black patch, which had not fallen off with his hat, but had only been pushed aside, sticking aslant over one side of his forehead, poor Mark not only presented a most disreputable figure, but one which it was, in the moonlight, by no means easy to recognize. Even the keeper looked at him for some moments without having any idea as to who this prisoner might be. He then exclaimed—

"Why, Mr. Horace, I do believe that I have my old friend Arthur Westcroft at last!"

Mr. Darrell had hitherto been standing at

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some distance. He now came nearer. He, too, failed fully to recognize Mark at the first look, though he did so partially. "Arthur Westcroft or not," said he, "I must have that fellow handled gently. I had my eye on him at the beginning of the affray; and whatever motives may have brought him here, he did us good service. I saw him knock up yonder big rascal's gun at the moment that he was shooting at you, and, if I am not mistaken, you have to thank this poacher for your life."

"I saw there was a scuffle among them," returned Harry, "just as the man's gun went off, but I couldn't see exactly how it happened, sir."

"No, but I did, because I was only looking on, and not thinking of fighting, as you were. Possibly there was some quarrel among them, for after the shot this young man closed with the one with the gun; and had not that fellow, who seems to have been the leader of the gang, been so engaged, we should not have beaten the others so easily. This poacher has done us good service, though perhaps unintentionally."

"But I did mean it, sir," gasped poor Mark, who had once or twice before tried to speak, but who, owing partly to the confused state of his

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brain, and partly to the difficulty which he found in opening his bruised lips, had failed in so doing. "I did mean it, sir. It's me, sir—Mark Westcroft."

Both Mr. Darrell and the keeper expressed surprise, and the former asked very gravely, "How came you here, Westcroft?"

In such few broken words as he could muster, Mark declared that he had been forced to join the poachers against his will.

"This sounds strangely," remarked Mr. Darrell, "yet I must admit that what I saw of your conduct in the affray agrees with it. The whole matter shall be thoroughly inquired into in due time, but at present we have many things on our hands. If you are able to walk so far, you will do well to go down to the keeper's lodge and get Mrs. Gale to look to your cuts and bruises."

From these words Mark had to draw such comfort as he might, and there was undoubtedly a certain amount of encouragement in them. They told him that he was not to be regarded as one of the poachers, and that, if Mr. Horace was not yet convinced of his innocence, he was at least strongly inclined in his favour. All might yet be well.

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Mr. Darrell and the keeper had moved away ; they had, indeed, many things just then to occupy them. Mark rose to his feet, stretched himself, and had the satisfaction of making sure that, though stiff and sore, he had suffered no serious injury. He found that he was quite able to walk to the lodge, which, as we know, stood at no great distance from the scene of the affray.

He was sufficiently himself by this time to feel some curiosity as to what was to be seen, and what had already passed around him. He found that the poachers had made a determined resistance, but that they had been outnumbered and beaten by the keepers and their allies. Perhaps a third of the gang, including Clinker and Myers, had been captured ; the others had, for the present, made their escape, but had left their booty behind them.

For some minutes the fight had been a severe one. Happily, the only gunshot-wound inflicted had been on the hat of Watts the underkeeper, and as the skull beneath had escaped uninjured, this was no very important matter ; bruises, however, black eyes, and broken heads had been dealt out freely to those engaged on both sides.

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Harry Gale had, it seemed, rather expected his unwelcome visitors about the time of this full moon; but it was that shot which had alarmed Mark and his companions at the gate which had rendered him and his men specially vigilant, and which had led to the actual discovery, and consequent defeat, of the poachers. How and by whom that shot had been fired no one as yet knew. Mark, as it happened, was the person destined to find it out.

When Harry had been getting his men together, Mr. Horace Darrell, who had only that afternoon returned to the Court, was told what was going on, and had insisted on accompanying his people. He, however, took no part in the encounter. In the dress which he had put on for the occasion it was not to be expected that Mark should have recognized him in the moonlight, yet he had been within three or four yards of Gale at the time when Clinker's gun went off. But for him Mark's exploits might have passed unnoticed, and his position at the end of the affray would then have been a much more serious one.

Mark did not, however, gather the whole of these particulars before he left the scene of the struggle—only some part of them. Indeed, his

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bodily feelings were so uncomfortable, that he was soon glad to act on Mr. Darrell's advice, and make his way to the keeper's lodge.

Mrs. Gale, like the wives of most gamekeepers, had had some experience in the treatment of broken heads and other such-like external wounds. This was not her first case that night; but Mark was a favourite with her, and she gave him the best attention in her power. When the blood had been washed from his cut forehead he felt more comfortable, and gladly availed himself of Mrs. Gale's offer of an hour or two's sleep in the keeper's arm-chair.

He was awake again before the first streak of dawn. There had been no sleep for Harry Gale, nor had his door been fastened that night. Mark's waking sensations were not particularly agreeable. His head ached and he was sore all over, yet on the whole he was refreshed by his sleep. He felt equal to the walk home; and as he feared that his mother would suffer much anxiety on his account, he at once set off.

He had just emerged from the wood on its Blendon side when he heard what sounded like the groan of some one in distress. He listened for a moment, and the sound was repeated. It at once occurred to Mark that probably some

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one of the poachers had been hurt in the fight, and, trying to run away, had been able to get no further than this.

As fast as his own wounds and weakness would permit Mark went to the aid of his fellow-sufferer, whose need seemed so much greater than his own. The groans came from a spot at some little distance from the path. Keeping along the outer side of the fence of the covert, he approached it. There were some railings at this place, over which it was possible to climb. Lying in the ditch beside these railings was the injured man. Mark went up to him, and to his horror found that it was none other than his cousin Arthur.

Yes, Arthur it was, and with one of his legs completely shattered by shot; yet, in spite of the agony he had suffered, and in spite of his having lain in that ditch through nearly the whole of a cold autumn night, he was still able to tell his cousin of the manner in which he had received his injury. When, on the previous evening, he had set off to join his fellow-poachers at their meeting-place, he had, for the sake of concealment, taken his gun apart, and put the stock in one pocket and the barrels in the other. The barrels were loaded; it was a muzzle loader,

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and he had not taken the precaution to remove the caps. In hastily getting over the fence into the wood one of the barrels had gone off, and he had received its contents in the knee. This was that single shot which had been heard by both poachers and keepers, and thus, without meaning it, Arthur had really betrayed his associates.

Having laid the sufferer in a more easy position, and wrapped his own coat round him, Mark ran off to the village for help.

Arthur was brought home, and had to lose his leg. He was very penitent, and now spoke with much contrition of his past misdeeds. In particular, he dwelt with shame and sorrow on the two unworthy devices by which he had so much injured the fair fame and prospects of his cousin Mark. Beside asking Mark's forgiveness, he was most anxious that his confession should be made known, and the injury, as far as was possible, repaired.

For some time Arthur's life was considered to be in danger. It was long before he was able to leave his sick-bed, and among those who tried to make this dreary time more cheerful for him, no one was more zealous than his cousin Mark. Eventually he got well again; and

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though he had to stump through life on a wooden leg, he was as well able to follow his trade as before—better, in fact, for he was now a reformed character. His sharp lesson had not been thrown away upon him, and he became as industrious and respectable as he had before been idle and dissipated. Old George Westcroft, to whose age he was at last a comfort, always spoke of the accident and lost leg as blessings.

The worthy old shoemaker, even in the midst of his troubles with his unhappy son, felt and expressed real joy when the perfect innocence of his favourite Mark was made manifest. How great was the delight of Mark's mother on the same occasion it will scarcely be necessary to say, yet it may be interesting to the reader to know that the speech in which uncle Barnet expressed his satisfaction was the longest he is ever recorded to have made, either before or since.

As for Harry Gale, the keeper, he considered it his duty to ask pardon for past coldness, and for the suspicions he had entertained; and that he was moreover bound to thank Mark for saving him from being shot by Clinker. He did both, in his own hearty, manly, and straightforward

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fashion. Thenceforward the two naturalists were greater friends than ever.

But to Mark himself there was nothing in connection with his restored good name which brought him so much satisfaction as the reflection that Mr. Horace Darrell would again think well of him. Yet, though Mark did not know it, the truth is that that gentleman had never really believed the charges against him. Mr. Horace was a shrewd judge of character, and had faith in his own judgment. The opinion he had formed of Mark was a high one, and he was not willing to let it be shaken by mere rumours.

Till he could, however, inquire into those rumours and prove them to be false, he had, in deference to public opinion, thought it best that Mark should not continue to act as his representative. He had now come home, earlier than he had intended, that he might examine into the matter. Circumstances had, however, saved him that trouble.

It was with no ordinary feelings of pleasure that he restored Mark to his post; and the reading-rooms, fitted with every attraction that care could supply, were in due time opened. Thus far they appear to be appreciated by the

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Blendon people, and to be successful, though whether they will effect all the good which Mr. Darrell hopes from them remains to be proved.

If they fail it will not be through any want of zeal on the part of the librarian. Mark is interested in his work, and thoroughly enjoys it. So ably does he carry out Mr. Darrell's views, that he has completely secured the good opinion of his patron, and may rely on him as a staunch and valuable friend through life.

THE END.

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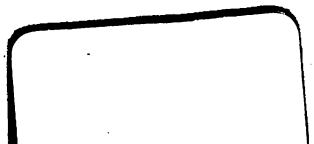

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